CASTLES, KILTS, AND Caresses
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Castles, kilts, and Caressses

The Bold Heart Carment Caine
Highland Courage by Ceci Giltenan
Knight in Highland Armor by Amy Jarecki
My Highland Lord by Tarah Scott
Some Like It Kilted by Sue-Ellen Welfonder
Highland Thunder by Lily Baldwin

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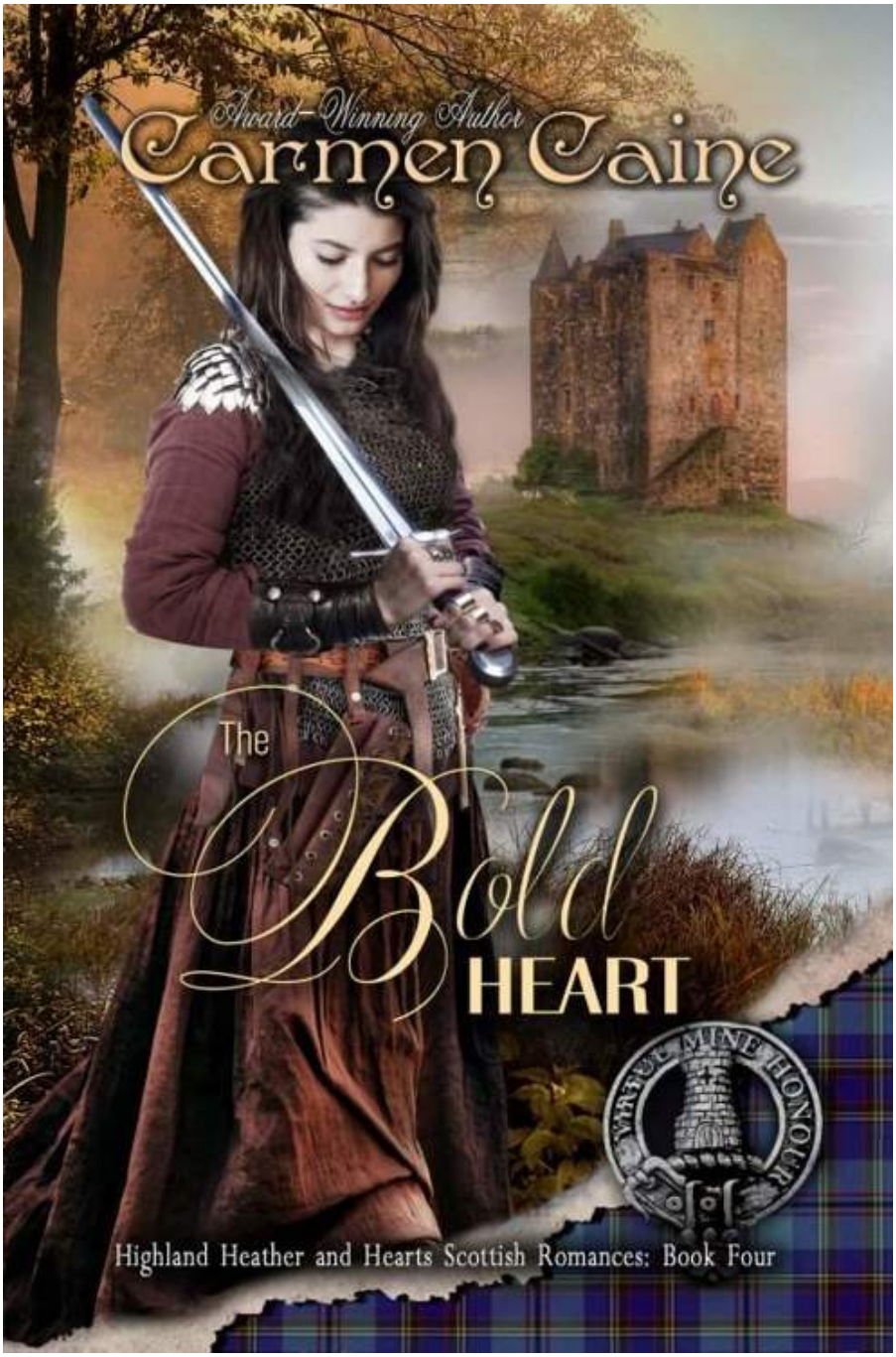
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Award-Winning Author
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The
Bold
HEART
VIRTUE MINE HONOUR
Highland Heather and Hearts Scottish Romances: Book Four

The Bold heart

Carmen Caine

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To my own wee merry lass:
Kailyn

Chapter One – The Hanging at Hairibee

Dunvegan Castle, Scotland
April, 1488

"Merry! 'Tis a rider, a messenger!"

Shading her eyes, Merry squinted out of the window into the gray afternoon to see a thin, raven-haired lad with red cheeks waving from the top of the grassy hillock. Alarmed, she lurched to her feet, but upon seeing the grin on her nephew's face, she heaved a sigh of relief.

"Good tidings, then," she said under her breath.

The old woman seated by the peat fire caught Merry's wrist. "Ye can't leave yet, lass," her voice quavered. "Not till ye've told me the day. Did they choose? Ye know I've been waiting."

Merry smiled down at her and then scanned the crumpled parchment she'd been reading aloud.

It was a challenging task.

The words upon the page were blurred and difficult to decipher, clearly penned by someone unaccustomed to the quill. And the messenger had been a careless one. The letter had arrived grubby and wine-stained. More than one word had turned into a blob of black ink. But the last few sentences were legible. The most important ones.

"They'll wed afore the harvest, Joanna." She summed the contents in a single sentence. After kissing the top of the old woman's head, she added, "And I'll see ye there, 'tis no cause for ye to fash yourself. She'll be a proper wedded woman afore the bairn arrives."

Joanna's face creased into a wide gap-toothed smile. "Thank ye, lass, thank ye." And then with a 'hisst' she shoved Merry toward the croft door. "Ye can read the rest to me later, aye? Now off with ye to the Lady Bree. Mayhap we've word of yer brother now?"

"Judging by the grin on Will's face, 'twould seem so," Merry answered with what she hoped would be a heartening smile.

They'd all been worried for Ruan. Scotland was in turmoil. Civil war was no longer a question of if, but when. Rumors abounded that even the king's own son had now risen against him. It had been a fortnight since the Earl of Lennox had summoned Ruan to Stirling, and he'd left at once in the company of his finest warriors.

Stepping out into daylight, Merry smiled tenderly at the young lad slipping down the steep grassy incline. Joanna's croft was tucked away at the base of a hill, near the flat-topped mountains rising out of the moors. Sheep bleated in the distance, heralding the return of the old woman's son.

A muffled curse diverted Merry's attention back to her nephew

arriving in a mudslide of fern and bits of bracken. Catching his balance, he rushed forward to greet her. William MacLeod. Ruan and Bree's only surviving child—a mischievous rascal of a lad, and a lad after her own heart.

Catching him by the ear, she raised a warning brow. "Mind that tongue of yours, Will. And what brings ye so far from Dunvegan? Your mother will be fair angry with me to find ye've wandered this far."

He paused a moment to catch his breath and then cocked a roguish brow in return. "And ye'll not be telling her, Merry," he said with confidence.

Merry reached over and tweaked his nose. They both knew he was right.

"She mollycoddles me so. Treats me like a bairn she does!" he went on to protest.

Merry's eyes lit indulgently. "We all do, ye rascal," she muttered and then looked away.

The dragging winter of the year before had seen the fever sweep through the clan. They'd lost many, including both of Will's siblings, Rory and Katherine. The memory of their loss still tore Merry's heart. Again, she heard Ruan's roar of grief echoing through Dunvegan's halls, and in her mind's eye, she saw Bree weeping softly against his shoulder, seeking solace.

Shaking her head, Merry brought herself to the present.

"Your mother has cause to fret, Will," she told him, cupping his chin in her hand and forcing his dark eyes to meet hers. "Give the poor woman some peace, aye?"

Will's face clouded. "I miss Rory and Katherine, too," he admitted quietly, but then the rebellious spark in his eye returned. "But I canna stay in Dunvegan the rest of my days! I'm no longer a wean. Tell her that, will ye now?"

Merry grinned. "Enough of this lackwit babbling," she said, giving him an affectionate cuff on the side of the head. "Did your Da send tidings from Stirling, then?"

"Aye, and he's done naught but feast at Cameron's side for the past fortnight." Will snorted in disgust. "Nae fighting. There's no war yet." He looked disappointed.

"Dinna be so anxious for bloodshed, ye wee fool," Merry scolded lightly even as she exhaled a deep sigh of relief.

But her relief was short-lived.

"Nae, but he has tidings of some earl's son," Will added offhand. "Some fool got himself caught by the English. The MacLean of Duart's son 'twas. Ewan. Ewan MacLean."

Merry's heart stopped.

"Ewan!" she gasped, choking on his name.

Ewan MacLean. A name that swept her into the past when she was a wee lass. Back to the time when she'd been wed to Fearghus, the MacDonald of Duntelm. The man had been evil incarnate. On their wedding night he'd beaten her nearly senseless. Seeking revenge against her clan, he'd clearly had the intention of taking her life in the cruelest possible way. The night had been brutal, but the memory of it no longer caused her pain. She'd set those memories free years ago.

All but one.

One memory from that night she cherished: the recollection of Ewan MacLean's flaxen head popping up in the tower window. He'd been a lad then, younger than she was now, and he'd scaled the precarious castle walls to rescue her. He'd taken one look at her distressed state and of Fearghus' hand raised for the deathblow. With his handsome face suffused with rage, Ewan had roared and leapt through the window, staying her husband's hand as Ruan burst through the door with drawn sword. Leaving Ruan to take vengeance, Ewan had carried her to safety, crooning soft words of comfort.

"Ye'll be right in no time, I promise ye," he had whispered into her hair. "A MacLeod is who ye are. Hold fast."

"Merry?" Will's curious voice broke into her thoughts.

Merry blinked. She had to get back to Dunvegan and right quickly.

"We have to go home, Will," she said, glancing about.

He'd let his shaggy mountain pony loose to graze on the moor grasses at the top of the hill. Merry frowned. They'd have to send for the beastie later; it was no match for her stallion anyhow.

Turning to her nephew, she ordered crisply, "Ride with me, Will, and with haste."

Will's face split into a grin. "On *Diabhul*?" He nodded at her black stallion tied to the hawthorn hedge. "Ma will—"

"Your ma will understand," Merry interrupted, pulling him after her.

Bree wouldn't be pleased. After all these years, she still didn't care much for horses, particularly devious, high-spirited ones like Diabhul. To Merry, he was as docile as a kitten and as loyal as a hound dog, but to everyone else, he was a fiend from hell. No, Bree would be far from pleased to see her son riding Diabhul. But she would understand.

Diabhul nudged her hand, searching for a carrot as she untied him, and then fitting a foot into the stirrup, Merry swung herself into the saddle. With a spry hop, Will settled behind her, and they sprang away, guiding the horse onto the path twisting up the hill as the aged Joanna hobbled to the croft door to bid them a cheerful farewell.

The day was a chilly one. Already, the mists were thickening, billowing in from the sea as they crossed the moors. Spring had

arrived unusually late this year, and folk had begun to mutter. Some claimed it foretold of hard times to come in the months ahead. But that ‘twas nothing new. With the impending war, hard times were guaranteed.

As Diabhul raced across the gorse and heather, Merry smiled at Will’s shrieks of pleasure at the black stallion’s speed.

Closing her eyes, she let the cold wind caress her face and ruffle her dark hair. She always thought better on the back of a horse, more at peace and more centered.

Doubtless, Ewan’s rescue was underway, providing the man hadn’t already rescued himself. His fearsome reputation throughout Scotland hailed him as a formidable warrior, a man unparalleled in the art of the combat. Few dared to cross swords with him. In all likelihood, there was no cause to worry.

Letting her mind clear, she simply enjoyed the ride, and as they approached the shaggy heath-edged cliffs, the wind turned moist and carried with it the scent of the sea. Slowing Diabhul, she guided him down a narrow trail. The waves, crashing against the rocks below, grew louder with each step. Overhead, seagulls shrieked and swooped, and soon they arrived at the bottom and Merry let Diabhul once more gallop free down the shell-covered beach toward Dunvegan.

It wasn’t long before the MacLeods’ ancestral castle of Dunvegan rose high above them. Its massive mound of gold-hued stones perched high on its own island of yellow lichen and green moss-covered rocks. There was only one entrance to the castle and that was the sea-gate, a stone’s throw away from the village on the mainland.

Having reached the stables at the village’s north entrance, Merry slid off the stallion’s back and helped her nephew dismount.

“Get the boat ready, Will,” she ordered, patting her horse on the withers. “I’ll see Diabhul taken care of and then I’ll join ye.”

With an impish nod, the boy bounded away.

Stable lads then ran out to greet her, but as she led her stallion forward, they abruptly fell back in fear.

Merry raised an amused brow. “Not one of ye have a whit of courage,” she grumbled good-naturedly.

“Diabhul. ’Tis a beast rightly named,” one of the lads groused. “He is the Devil himself. Aye, and there’s no meaner-tempered beast roaming in all of Skye!”

“Ach, now,” Merry disagreed with a chuckle. “He’s as easy as a bairn.”

The lad snorted. “Then why did ye name him ‘Diabhul’?” he asked pertly.

Merry reached over and tousled his head. “Don’t ye start thinking now, lad. ‘Twill do ye no good as ye’ll still have to tend him.”

The lad shot her a grin but darted back as Diabhul flattened his ears. Lifting his lip, the horse lunged as if to nip the boy.

"See!" the lad cried, pointing. "He's after my blood, he is!"

"Easy, lads," Merry crooned to both boy and horse and led Diabhul into his stall herself.

Removing his saddle, she brushed him down with a handful of hay and had exited the stall just in time to see the stable lad lunge forward to toss the horse a pitchfork of hay. He hadn't gotten near enough to do a proper job and most of the hay landed on Diabhul's rump.

"Ye can do better than that," Merry scolded, but she didn't press the matter further. The lads were right; Diabhul hated everyone but her. She'd come back after she'd heard the tidings herself.

Will sat in a small boat, poking with a stick at the fish in the water as he waited for her, and taking up the oars, Merry rowed the short distance to the sea-gate. A watchman helped them to disembark, and they hurried up the narrow flight of steps cut deep into the rock and entered the castle grounds.

"Hie ye off now, Will," Merry hissed in a conspiratorial tone. "Mayhap your mother doesna yet know ye rode Diabhul."

Flashing a wide smile, he bounded away.

Dusting her hands, Merry took a step forward but then pulled up short.

Bree stood by the well, her arms crossed.

The years had changed Bree. Gone was the shy, unassuming English maiden that had stolen her brother's heart. In that girl's place stood a gentle yet commanding lady. Her brown curls were braided and pinned neatly to her head, and fine lines appeared under her green, sharp eyes—eyes that hadn't missed a thing.

"Did you really think I wouldn't see him riding Diabhul?" Bree asked, smoothing her skirts. "And if I hadn't, Merry, there are at least ten others who also saw and were telling me long afore you even reached the stables."

Merry heaved an apologetic sigh. "'Twas the tidings of Ewan," she said in her defense.

Bree's green eyes narrowed and her lips thinned.

The silence between them grew.

And then Bree sighed too. "And how much did Will tell you?" she finally asked.

Merry exhaled, knowing that she'd been forgiven—at least for the moment. "Only that he was caught by the English," she answered.

"Yes, he was betrayed," Bree answered in her quiet way. "He'd ridden to free Alec Montgomery from the Cunninghams, but 'twas a trap. Ewan and his men, along with Alec, were ambushed in the Borderlands and then taken as prisoners." She paused a moment

before adding, “He’s in the keeping of the Lord Warden of the West March—in Carlisle.”

Merry swallowed. Carlisle was a lawless place. Treachery and deceit abounded there. Mayhap, Ewan wouldn't be able to rescue himself after all.

“And what is being done about it, sister?” Merry asked with a frown. “Surely, the Earl of Douglas can free him? As Lord Warden of the East March, can he not now wrest Ewan from the hands of the English?”

“Ruan says ‘tis not so simple a matter,” Bree continued, motioning for Merry to follow her into the castle. “Not with Alec Montgomery tangled in the affair. The Lord Wardens will not agree anytime soon upon the Cunningham-Montgomery dispute. Instead, Ruan has asked that we send Gentle John to Carlisle straightway to free Ewan and the others before harm finds them.”

Merry’s brown eyes lit with concern. While Gentle John was undoubtedly one of the fiercest warriors in the clan and a man wholly capable of overseeing Ewan’s rescue, he’d recently taken a fall from a horse whilst jousting. His injuries had him still abed, hardly ready at that moment to command a daring rescue.

Bree waved a hand as she mounted the spiral stairs leading into the hall. “I shall find another to go sooner in his stead, Merry,” she assured. “’Tis not time to fret. We’ll see Ewan saved.”

“But when?” Merry asked with a worried scowl. Aye, she was only growing more worried by the minute. “We must not delay, Bree. If we wait too long, they’ll have him hung at Hairibee!”

“Ewan is the Earl of Mull’s son,” Bree disagreed firmly. “His life will not be taken so lightly.”

Merry’s scowl deepened. She didn’t share Bree’s certainty.

They entered the hall then, and the Lady of Dunvegan was surrounded at once by a bevy of women, all eager for her attention.

“Did ye see what Merry did, my lady?” one gasped, fanning her cheeks.

“Riding *that* horse, he was,” a small, spare woman of middle age inserted.

“Ach, Merry must be touched in the head,” began another with a disapproving face, but then as Merry stepped up behind Bree, her hand flew to cover her mouth.

Merry rolled her eyes. “Yes, I let wee Will ride Diabhul,” she snapped, and then shouldering past them, made her way to an aged white-haired figure slumped before the massive fireplace.

It was Isobel, her nursemaid, and a woman both she and Ruan looked upon as a mother even more than their own.

“Ruan?” the old woman queried feebly as she approached. A smile

crossed her withered face as her hand fluttered in greeting.

"Nay, 'tis Merry," Merry answered with a smile. "Are ye not a wee bit disappointed now?"

Isobel gave a small laugh. "Ye look so much like him, my sweet lass."

Merry feigned a frown, but she knew Isobel spoke the truth. She not only shared her brother's raven hair, unusual height, and dark brown eyes, but she mirrored his skill with a bow and was not bad with dirk in hand as well.

"Aye, I should have been born a lad," she said with a laugh.

Isobel's old eyes gleamed as she took in Merry's appearance. "Crooked hems and loose threads," she clucked. "I've done ye wrong, ye can't even sew a straight seam. 'Tis time ye wed ere the lads notice my failure."

Arranging the shawl around Isobel's shoulders, Merry leaned down and kissed the top of the old woman's head. "But I can ride and hunt better than any man and hold my own with a sword. What need have I of a husband?"

Isobel clucked. "Can ye get a bairn on your own too, then?"

Merry snorted a little. Isobel had been nagging her more of late. "I've already been wed and widowed, 'twas enough to suffice me. Besides, I dinna want a comfortable, ordered life. Ye know I'm happy as I am."

The old woman's forehead knit into a frown. "Love 'tis what I'm speaking of, lass. Love," she mumbled, and then with an acid glare, she settled back to doze before the fire.

Merry watched her a moment before turning away.

She had no interest in a husband. After her disastrous marriage, Ruan had promised to let her choose her own husband, if and when she found true love. Mayhap someday, but she hadn't found love yet, and she hadn't felt particularly inclined to seek it out either. She quite liked her life, riding Diabhul on the moors, tending to the crofters, and hunting for the clan as needed.

Stretching, she surveyed the hall. The evening feast would start soon. In the corner, several hounds rooted in the rushes for bones. Lads scurried about, lighting the torches on the walls. Already, the servants were setting the tables.

At the far end of the hall, Bree stood, conversing with the ladies circled around her.

Merry winced.

Most likely, they spoke of her, and as they began to move in her direction, Merry moved to make her escape.

Feeling strangely restless, she returned to the sea-gate and taking a boat, rowed to shore. With her thoughts preoccupied by Ewan, she

saw Diabhul properly tended to before joining the stable hands for a steaming bowl of herring stew, barley loaf, and a mug of home-brewed ale.

What if Ewan couldn't escape on his own? What if he'd been injured? Or what if they truly planned to hang him despite his noble blood?

The feud between the Montgomery and Cunningham clans was a vicious and bloody one. The Cunninghams might harm Ewan regardless, earl's son or no.

Thinking in circles, Merry idly spooned her stew, watching as it slowly congealed before giving up on the notion of eating altogether. Setting her uneaten portion down before a grateful mouser, she made her way back to the castle.

As Lady of Dunvegan, Bree presided in the hall during Ruan's absence, settling clan disputes as necessary, and judging by the guffaws and wheedling tones coming from the hall, there was a particularly amusing dispute that evening—one likely to keep the clan's attention for quite some time.

Not in the mood to join in the revelry, Merry headed to her chamber, and closing her eyes, lay back on her heather-filled pallet.

Through the open window, she could hear the gentle lapping of the waves as they mingled with the rise and fall of the afternoon pipes drifting on the wind.

"If only I'd been born a man," she lamented aloud.

If she were a man, she wouldn't wait for someone to take action. She owed Ewan a life-debt, and because of that, she'd ride to England and rescue him herself.

The thought gave her pause.

She could wield a weapon as good as any man in the clan, shoot an arrow better, and her skills on the horse were unmatched.

Slowly, she sat up and hugged her legs, resting her chin upon the top of her knees. She could see her reflection in the small polished mirror hanging next to her bed. Large dark eyes stared back at her in a strong-featured face. Her lips were full and carved like marble. Twisting her raven hair back into a tight rope, she analyzed her image critically.

She was unusually tall. Taller than most men, but she couldn't pass for one, given her delicate complexion.

But if she cut her hair, she just might pass for a lad.

Playing with her locks, she let them slip through her fingers.

Carlisle was a turbulent English town where border warfare raged—a lawless place where one could bribe anyone. No doubt a man such as Gentle John could free Ewan by strength of arms.

But a cunning mind and a few good coins might free him easier ...

and sooner.

She made up her mind at once.

Unsheathing a sharp blade, it was only a matter of moments before the last lock of raven hair fluttered to the chamber floor.

It was irregular, not to mention unseemly, for a lass to travel abroad without proper escort, but Ruan had trained her well, and she would travel quickly. Diabhul's speed was unmatched.

Bree would be distraught and Ruan furious, but she strengthened her resolve. 'Twas a matter of honor. Ewan had saved her life. She was certain she could save his.

Carlisle was a fortnight away. She would need little coin on the journey down, but a fair amount to actually free him. Wriggling under the bed, she pulled out a small wooden chest and took out a leather pouch. She'd saved quite a bit of coin over the years. Surely, it would be enough. Choosing her heaviest woolen cloak, she quickly sewed the coins into the hem.

And then once again standing before the mirror, she judged her appearance. With her short hair, she was closer to passing for a lad. But she had to hide her breasts. Ripping the corner of the muslin sheet from her bed into strips, she bound her chest as tightly as she could and surveyed the results. With a mischievous grin at the boyish image smiling back at her, she ran her hand through her cropped hair and then, collecting her bow and quiver, set off to borrow a pair of Ruan's travel breeches.

She visited the castle storeroom next, tiptoeing past ricks of cabbages and sacks of oats to the baskets of hard cheese and thick salted bannocks. Placing her selection in the center of a plaid, she tied the four corners into a neat parcel and hefted it, testing its weight. Satisfied, she drew her hood to hide her shorn head and, keeping to the shadows, slipped out of the castle once again to head for the sea-gate.

She'd just passed the well when she heard the soft sound of padded footsteps behind her. She knew immediately who it was.

"Skulking about now, are ye, Will?" she asked as she turned around.

Skipping out of the shadows, he replied in a loud whisper, "Heading off to England, are ye no?"

Merry arched an amused brow. "A keen eye ye have, lad," she said, impressed. "Sometimes, I wonder if ye truly are of the fairy ilk."

They both shared a quiet laugh.

And then, bouncing with excitement, he asked, "Can I come?"

His face fell then as he read his answer in her expression, and it took him a moment to master his disappointment.

Stepping forward, Merry tousled his head fondly. "Next time," she

said, and winked. “Now hie ye off to your mother like a good lad, but not a word of me till the morrow, aye?”

“Aye,” he agreed solemnly, but then gave a reluctant smile.

Shouldering her pack once more, she left him at the well and made her way to where the night watchman stood by the tethered boats.

“Off to tend Diabhul again?” the man asked, a smile creasing his weathered face.

“Aye, he’s a wee bit off his feed,” Merry lied easily enough. Tossing her bow and the pack into the boat, she hopped in after them. “I’ve a mind to sit with him this night and mayhap hunt with the dawn,” she added for good measure.

Behind the watchman’s back, Will grinned and began to dance.

Sending her nephew a warning glare, Merry grabbed the oars and shoved off.

Gray mist consumed her almost at once, but before the sight of Will disappeared into the blanket of fog, she saw his thin arm raise in farewell.

Blowing him a kiss in response, she turned away and set the oars deeper into the water. The boat pitched a little as she strained forward, and excitement tingled through her.

She was really leaving, heeding the call of destiny.

For a brief moment, she felt a pinch of guilt over Ruan and Bree. They would worry, but it would not be for long. She would see Ewan free right quickly and return to Dunvegan before a month had gone.

Diabhul was restless, sensing her excitement as she adjusted the leather straps of her favorite saddle. It was a fine-tooled saddle, inlaid with silver filigree and fit for a nobleman. A gift from Ruan. Securing the last buckle, she led Diabhul from his stall, past the snoring stable lad, and out onto the dirt road.

A heavy fog veiled the village, wrapping the trees and the moss-covered stones in mist. It was so thick that it muffled sound and sight.

No one would see her go.

It was as if fate itself were lending a hand.

Leaving the castle of her birth behind, she set the course south and headed out onto the moors. She rode slowly at first but with increasing speed, knowing Diabhul to be as sure-footed as a mountain goat. She didn’t really need to guide him. They both knew practically every gray boulder and clump of grass dotting the Isle of Skye.

They moved easily through the night, and gradually the horizon turned a dull gray, and when the morning sun pierced the haze, she paused on the edge of a bog filled with bracken and brown reeds. Sliding from her horse's back, she shook off the wet chill of the night’s mist that had seeped through her woolen cloak and then stretched in

the sun's warmth.

Nearby, a burn trickled over the stones.

Removing Diabhul's bridle, she let the black stallion free to graze on the spring grass and then knelt by the burn to fill her waterskin. The brown water tasted of peat, but it was refreshing all the same.

Most likely, Bree wouldn't discover her missing until the morrow and mayhap not even till the day after, if Will could keep her secret. Merry often hunted, sometimes staying with the crofters rather than riding home in the dark.

Helping herself to a bannock, she let Diabhul wander a little and eyed the jagged peaks of the Coolins in the distance.

She hadn't seen Ewan since she was ten. He must have changed. She certainly had. Would she be able to recognize him?

Wiping her mouth on the back of her sleeve, she mounted once again and set off south across the moors. For the most part, she was alone, cantering with her steadfast steed through flocks of grazing sheep, seeing only the occasional turf-roofed croft whose occupants would sometimes wave at her in greeting.

By the early afternoon, she'd reached the sandy swatch of beach across from the castle of Eilean Donan. Gulls reeled overhead, their cries mingling with the keening of the wind as she galloped to the ferry landing.

A short, bald ferryman met her, cocking a wary eye at the dark clouds gathering on the horizon.

"Ye'd best hurry, lad," he said. "There's a storm brewing in the east."

It took her a moment to realize that he was addressing her, and with her best, raspy laugh, she lowered her voice to reply, "And a good day to ye, sir. Might I have passage to the mainland for myself and my horse?"

The man eyed her oddly but accepted the coin readily enough, and feeling foolish, she guided Diabhul onto the ferry. She'd have to play the part of a lad continually now, and she'd do best to remember that.

Holding tightly onto Diabhul's bridle, she watched the Isle of Skye recede slowly into the fog for a time before shifting her attention to the ferryman.

His hands were work-hardened, a testament to a lifetime of manual labor.

She glanced at her own hands. Whilst not as soft as a proper lady's, they were hardly the hands of a working lad.

She'd have to choose a name and spin a tale that suited the lad she must be. She couldn't sing nor play an instrument, so calling herself a wandering bard was out of the question. Mayhap she should

play the part of a messenger? Or an apprentice, escaping his cruel master?

Several times, the ferryman appeared as if he wished to talk, but fortunately, there was too much wind to carry on any kind of conversation, and soon enough, they'd reached the opposite shore.

Galloping along the road, she made it a point to avoid the castle of Eilean Donan. It was too risky. The lord and lady knew Ruan well. Instead, she nudged her horse away from the crack of the waves and seabirds floating on the wind, and cantered south toward England.

* * *

Fortune had favored her journey, and masquerading as a lad had been easier than she'd thought it would be. Her unusual height had certainly helped. After a few awkward attempts at speaking in a low voice, she'd given up trying to alter it. No one seemed to question her.

She traveled quickly, and almost a fortnight from when she'd set out from Dunvegan, she arrived at the old Roman road in the borderlands, less than a day's journey from Carlisle.

With each passing mile, she met more travelers—an old man leading a string of pack-horses, several creaking caravans, and a company of English soldiers, but to her relief, they left her alone, apparently seeing her as a harmless, gangly youth, most likely a messenger, given her quick-footed stallion.

And then finally, she was at Hadrian's Wall, and reining Diabhul in, she folded her arms and surveyed the town spread out before her.

Overlooking the River Eden, Castle Carlisle stood in the center of the city, a mighty fortress built to bring law and order to the perilous borderlands. Only, the castle itself had only become a cause for more conflict, with the English and the Scots taking turns at besieging it. At present, the castle belonged to the English, but there were still many a Scot to be found in the area—their allegiances carefully guarded.

'Twas no small wonder the place was a smoldering fire, ready to burst into a raging inferno at any moment.

Slowly, she rode through the town, eyeing the inns before selecting a small wattle-and-daub establishment sagging over the narrow lane at the southern edge of the town. Each floor jutted out over the last, and the entire building leaned precariously sideways, but the location was a superior one. From it, she could escape from town in a hurry, if the need arose.

Seeing Diabhul settled, she pulled a few coins from her pouch and, smoothing her wrinkled shirt, ducked under the iron sign proclaiming the place to be called *The Laughing Cockerel*.

It had been almost two weeks since she'd had a decent hot meal. She could indulge in that, at least.

She'd avoid the bed later that night, however. As a lad, she'd be

expected to share one with at least three other men. It was not a particularly appealing prospect. Instead, she'd sleep in the stables with Diabhul.

The warmth of the inn was a pleasant change from riding in the cold rain and, slipping off her boots, she flexed and stretched her toes out to the fire.

Around her, men and women chatted. She listened for a time, eating a few mouthfuls of mutton stew. But upon learning nothing of use, she put her damp boots back on and decided to survey the castle.

She had to rescue Ewan. She'd thought of nothing else the entire journey from Skye.

But, first she had to learn the exact circumstances of his confinement. She also hoped to find a trustworthy sort—a Scot preferably, who could point out to her those amongst the English guard who could be bribed. The chances of that were not good though, as the Scots who remained after the latest siege were none too keen to take unnecessary risk.

Crossing the market square, her eyes fell upon the market cross.

There, upon its base was nailed a parchment, and her heart stopped.

Ach, she should have thought to come here sooner. 'Twas likely a notice of pending executions.

Filled with a sense of dread, she ran to the post and scanned the writing.

It was, indeed, a list of those to be hanged at Hairibee the following evening, and with growing trepidation, she ran her finger over the names.

To her utter relief, Ewan's name wasn't amongst them, but there was a name she did recognize. Alec Montgomery, the man Ewan had been caught trying to save.

She frowned. Did that mean Ewan was next?

Closing her eyes, she took a deep, calming breath. She didn't have time to waste. She had to free them both and right quickly!

Steeling her resolve, she headed for the castle.

The river-scented breeze ruffled through her hair as she approached the castle and assessed its walls and the men who guarded them. They were strong, brawny men, but once she had Ewan free, no doubt he'd make short work of them. But still, there were men standing on the ramparts, and they had bows with menacing arrows ready to fly. She scowled.

"Stay, lad!" a sharp voice hailed her.

Taking a deep breath, Merry turned on her heel to see two English guards coming her way.

"What cause do you have to wander so aimlessly about?" one of

them asked in a rough tone.

Thinking quickly, Merry lurched sideways. “Good … good-ay, milord,” she hiccupped with a staggering step.

An expression of disgust crossed the man’s face. “The noon sun has barely risen and the fellow is already drunk,” he observed acidly to his companion.

His companion merely laughed. “Who can blame him?” he asked. “I would give my right hand for a flask of that Rhennish wine.”

At that, the first guard’s expression relaxed. “And wouldn’t we all?”

Without another glance in Merry’s direction, they continued their patrol. She watched them go.

Rhennish wine.

Once, she’d seen Ruan angry with the night watchmen of Dunvegan for partaking of too much Rhennish wine. He’d caught them at the sea-gate weaving unsteadily on their feet, and he’d pushed them into the loch as a reward for their carelessness. After clambering out of the cold waters and begging his mercy, they’d never succumbed to the temptation again.

She’d never forgotten it.

Folding her arms, she tapped her fingers thoughtfully.

Bree had often told her that men were such simple creatures. Mayhap, Rhennish wine could be of aid. And with wine often came other weaknesses, such as women.

With the beginnings of an idea, she retreated to the shadows to watch the guards. And when the afternoon church bells rang, she’d found the thing she’d sought. A particularly comely woman in a green linen kirtle had passed through the castle gates with uncommon ease. Several times.

Following the woman into an alehouse, Merry prepared to approach her, but the woman took note of her first.

“You’re a handsome fellow now,” she called out in a wheedling tone. “Come find me if you need a bedfellow.”

Merry swallowed a snort but sent the woman a roguish grin. “I dinna need a bedfellow at this moment,” she said. “But I would care for a wee bit of company.” Sitting down at an empty table, she tossed a shilling onto the surface.

The woman joined her at once, pouncing on the coin and tucking it away into her bosom. “Tell me why such a fine young gentleman as yourself is in need of company now, will you?” she asked with a flirtatious smile. “With eyes like yours, you’ve your pick of the maidens, don’t you now?”

Merry subjected her to a measuring gaze, but then deciding she really didn’t have much to lose, replied truthfully, “I’ve a friend in the

castle that I must see. And ye look like a lass who knows how to open doors."

The woman's eyes widened but then took on a greedy glint. "My name is Hulda," she said, introducing herself. "And I might know how … or I might not."

"Then 'tis unfortunate for ye now if ye dinna know enough," Merry replied with a fake yawn, spreading her fingers just enough to reveal the glint of a silver coin.

Hulda didn't miss it. Leaning forward, she hissed, "And where might this friend of yours *be* in the castle?"

"Shackled." Merry gave her the honest answer.

"As I thought, then." Hulda rolled her eyes. "'Tis plain on your Scotch face." She fell silent, eyeing Merry speculatively.

Taking another swig of ale, Merry patiently waited for her to continue.

"'Tis easy enough if you have the coin," Hulda said at last. "But he'll demand a princely sum. And he'll just get you in. You'll have to get yourself out."

Merry didn't hesitate. She didn't really have much of a choice, and mayhap it was all she needed. Ewan and his men were experienced warriors. Once they were free, it would be difficult to catch them again.

"Then if you're still of a mind, I'll introduce you to my friend for the price of two shillings," Hulda proposed. "He'll be in town on the morrow at dawn, but I'll have those shillings now."

Merry didn't really want to wait that long, but she'd already gone so far down this path, there was no time to choose another. Taking a long drink from her mug, she set it down with a crash. "One now, and t'other then. And dinna think to cross me," she warned, fishing a coin from her pouch.

She watched the woman scurry away, wondering if she'd just wasted a shilling, but it was too late to do much else that night. She was exhausted, and tomorrow she'd need her strength and wits about her to see Ewan free.

Returning to the *Laughing Cockerel*, she paid more than she pleased for the right to sleep in the stables and, climbing into the loft, settled back into the straw, her saddle for a pillow.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow she'd secure Ewan's freedom.

She'd have to buy horses. Ripping the hem of her cloak, she pulled out the last of her coins and, hefting them in her palm, counted them under her breath. She didn't know how many men Ewan had with him, but she could only spare enough coin to purchase three, maybe four serviceable horses and still have enough left over to bribe the

English, if need be. She only prayed that she did have enough.

Wearily, she sank back into the straw.

On the morrow, she *had* to succeed. She refused to think of any other outcome.

* * *

To her surprise, she slept well. It seemed only a moment later when she opened her eyes to find the sun had risen and a new day begun.

After a hasty breakfast of cold mutton and stale bread, she wove her way through the gathered throngs and past the boats moored on the quay. Her first item of business was to purchase horses with which to make good their escape. She could only find three suitable geldings, and after haggling an acceptable price for all three, she returned to the inn and tethered them at Diabhul's side.

Stepping out of the stables, she found Hulda waiting impatiently. "I almost left," she chided as Merry tossed her the other shilling. "Follow and be quick."

Turning on her heel, the woman hurried down the narrow, winding lane and led Merry across the town to a refuse-littered street dotted with boisterous alehouses. And then stopping before a green door, she rapped sharply upon it several times.

After a moment, the door was opened by a sour-faced matron with jiggling jowls. Her disdainful gaze swept Merry from head to toe.

"The lad I was speaking of…" Hulda offered in explanation.

The sour woman simply stood there a moment before heaving her considerable bulk to one side, allowing them to pass. "Robert's there," she muttered and pointed.

Across the small vaulted room, a middle-aged man with a long gray-speckled beard sat scratching his belly as he watched several men at dice.

Merry waited for the sour woman and Hulda to lead the way, but when neither woman moved, she stepped forward and approached the man herself. Up close, she realized that he was much smaller than he'd first appeared, and the stench about him proved he clearly hadn't bathed in months.

"Robert?" she asked, towering over him.

He didn't respond.

Narrowing her eyes, she pressed, "Are ye hard of hearing, man?"

The dice-playing companions paused their game to look up in astonishment.

When Robert still didn't move, Merry lost her temper. She had little time for games. Annoyed, she snapped, "Suffer from a lack of a backbone, do ye? Is that why ye think to ignore me?"

He looked at her then, his mouth parting slightly in surprise as

one of the dice-playing fellows sprang hotly to his feet and drew his sword.

But Merry was quicker.

Whirling behind him, she pressed the blade of her dirk against the man's throat before he'd scarcely managed to stand.

There was a stunned silence, one in which Merry could hear the man's panicked breathing mingled with the pounding of her own heart.

And then Robert chuckled in approval. "You're a bold fellow!"

Merry met his gaze with an unwavering glare of her own. "I dinna have the time to play games," she scolded harshly. "I've come to do business and pay ye right well for your services."

His smile broadened, revealing yellowed teeth. "I like to test the mettle of a man, you see," he said with a shrug. And then pointing to the man quavering under the tip of Merry's dirk, he added, "Let the fool free."

After a moment, she let the man go with a shove and sheathed her dirk.

"A pox on your knavish soul," the dice-playing man muttered as he slunk into the shadows amidst the amused snickering of his companions.

"Hulda says you wish to enter the dungeon," Robert said without preamble. "Now is a dangerous time for such things. You would do better to wait—"

"I canna wait," Merry interrupted. "I must enter, and I must bring others with me as I leave."

He eyed her speculatively, and then said, "Three Rose Nobles. No less."

"'Tis no more than highway robbery!" Merry snapped, outraged. Within her cloak, she hefted her money pouch, knowing she had scarce but ten shillings left in it.

Robert saw her hesitation. "Then a good day, young sir," he said, turning back to the dice game.

Merry frowned, frustrated. She had no more coin, but she had the silver filigreed saddle—Ruan's gift. Parting from it would be painful but worth the cause.

Adopting a brash tone, she tossed her money pouch at the man. "This coin and a fine-tooled saddle with silver tracings," she said. "A saddle fit for a nobleman. 'Tis worth a small fortune."

Catching the pouch, he tilted his head speculatively to one side, and then shaking the coins into the palm of his hand, counted them swiftly. His eyes lit.

Knowing that he was going to agree, she added quickly, "And ye must supply two caskets of Rhennish wine and send them to distract

the guards this very day. I canna wait."

"Now?" he asked, astonished. "You're mad. Night would—"

"Nay, 'twill not be expected now." She shook her head with certainty. "There are fewer guards now, are there not?"

"Because 'tis madness to escape in the broad light of day," he snorted, scratching his stubbly chin. "And there's hangings this evening ..." At that, his eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"They'll be expecting an attack on the way to Hairibee," Merry answered his unspoken question. "Not afore, at the castle."

His frown deepened and his gaze lost focus. After a moment, he gave a small laugh. "Mayhap 'twill work. I've never known a guard to turn down the chance to swill the Rhennish juice."

Merry nodded, forcing a calm smile.

"Forsooth, but you Scottish folk are touched in the head. 'Tis folly to try such a thing, but I'll send the wine. I know just the men who won't be able to resist it. Yes, I'll see you in, and get you out the gate. After that, you're on your own," he said, shaking his head in outright admiration. "You certainly are a bold fellow."

"Then I'll return with the saddle within the hour," Merry said, rising to her feet.

It all happened quickly after that, and by the time she'd returned, she'd found Robert true to his word. The wine had been sent, and he was ready, sitting in a cart. The back was filled with sacks of grain over which a length of burlap had been tied.

His eyes gleamed upon seeing the saddle, and he motioned for one of his men to take it away before patting the empty seat next to him and winking. "Hop to, lad. I've business with the watchkeeper. You'll have until noon to get your men to the cart, and I'll smuggle them out the gate," he said, pausing to spit on the cobblestones. "After that, our ways part. For good."

Merry nodded and leapt up by his side.

The cart lurched forward, and they didn't speak as they rolled through Carlisle's narrow teeming streets, over the rough-planked bridge that spanned the moat, and to the castle gate.

The two guards merely waved them through, and as the cart rolled by the eastern tower, Robert nodded. "There," he muttered into his beard. "You have until noon, young fellow. Give wings to your feet."

Merry didn't need to be told twice.

Crossing herself, she hopped off the cart and sprinted toward the tower. The oaken door stood unguarded. There was not a man in sight.

Putting her shoulder to the door, she pushed it open cautiously and slipped inside.

Voices.

"I'll have another," one was saying. "'Tis wine fit for the king's table, it is."

"You've had enough now," another replied.

"Hsssst," came yet a third. "Do you want every man to know?"

Peeking around the corner, she saw three guards crouching around the kegs of Rhennish wine, and in the opposite corner, she saw an iron door with a ring of keys hanging on a nearby hook.

It only took a moment, and she had the keys. Another moment, and she was down the steps.

She gagged as she was met by the rank odor of unwashed bodies swarming with flies. But with sweaty palms, she crept forward, praying she would find Ewan quickly.

The braying of the guards' laughter drifted down the stairwell as she peered into the cells.

"And what are you looking for?" one of the cell's occupants called out.

"Who's the long lad?" another asked.

Ignoring them, Merry scanned the faces.

It was difficult to see. The torches on the walls provided little light beyond illuminating the wall behind them. And the stench of the place was overbearing, leaving her yearning for the sea and the crisp clean winds of Skye.

The guards above broke out into a drinking song, a raw reminder that she had little time to spare.

Determined, she pressed on.

And then she saw him.

A virile, powerful man, a battle-hardened warrior standing in the corner. Light from the torches fell upon his flaxen-hair and face, revealing eyes as blue as the sea and arms of corded steel.

And even though she hadn't seen him in well over ten years, she recognized him at once.

Ewan MacLean.

Chapter Two – Who Are Ye Truly?

"And who's the long lad?" Alec Montgomery asked, looking down his aristocratic high-bridged nose at the strange dark-haired youth approaching the cell. "Ho, there. Did ye bring whisky?"

"Whisky?" a prisoner retorted from the cell next door. "They treat us worse than dogs. At least they feed their curs."

"Aye, but 'tis an extraordinary day this," Alec tossed the words over his shoulder. "In but a few short hours, I'll swing from the gallows. That's deserving of a draught now, aye?" He laughed. But it was a bitterly false laugh and his green eyes were hard. Humorless.

Ewan MacLean eyed Alec in keen irritation. The young chestnut-haired man's reckless ways had landed them in their current predicament, a situation proving unusually difficult to escape from.

"Stay wary, Alec. Our time will come," Ewan cautioned under his breath and then pivoting on his heel, eyed the strange lad peering through the rusty iron bars that separated them.

A swift assessment revealed that he wasn't a guard.

Nor a fighting man.

For a brief moment, Ewan felt a sense of recognition. But upon closer inspection, he found the beardless boy's fine-featured face unfamiliar. His brown eyes were particularly large and even though he was tall, his build was slender—not in an awkward, gangly way, but in a long-legged, well-shaped one.

Ewan lifted a single brow.

There was almost a feminine air about the lad, and he pitied him for it. Such lads were often the victims of jest.

And then the youth in question's lips parted. "Ewan? Ewan MacLean? 'Tis ye, is it not?"

Surprised, Ewan's eyes widened as his men seated in the rank-smelling straw around him scrambled to their feet. The entire lot shouted orders at once.

"Unlock the cell, lad!"

"A highlander? With keys?"

"Be hasty, ye daft fool!"

"Silence!" Ewan thundered, pushing through them.

They fell back, and he arrived at the cell door just as it swung open. In a moment, he was through, stepping into the dungeon's narrow dank hallway.

Free.

He didn't hesitate. Grabbing the keys from the overwhelmed youth, he tossed the ring to the prisoners in the next cell. The more escaped prisoners, the harder it would be for the English to catch any

of them.

And then grasping the lad's forearm in an iron grip, Ewan questioned curtly, "Weapons? Did ye bring weapons?"

The lad licked his lips and nodded a little, drawing a dirk from his boot.

"And ye call that a weapon?" Alec snorted. "'Tis fit for a lass!"

"'Twill have to do," Ewan grunted, taking the dirk, but he did add, "Ye came ill-prepared, lad."

"A wee dirk? Just one wee blade?" the men grumbled around him.

"Eh?" the lad's mouth dropped open, floundering for words as the men filed out into the corridor.

Ignoring them, Ewan eyed the steps winding up to where the guards lurked, partaking of wine. "'Twill be simple enough to disarm them from the sound of it," he predicted curtly. "'Tis the guards on the ramparts we must evade to make good our escape—"

"How many are ye?" the strange lad interrupted, his fine brows furrowed. "I've only the cart and horses for four—"

"Four?" Ewan cut him off brusquely. "Nay, I've over a dozen good men here."

The lad's brown eyes grew round. "But I've only the one cart and —"

"I dinna know where ye hail from nor why ye've come to our aid, but 'tis time for ye to stand down, lad," Ewan cut him off again. His blue eyes swept him up and down. There wasn't much muscle there. "Stay aback now, aye? Ye clearly canna hold your own in a fight. I'll see ye safe."

The lad sputtered in protest, but Ewan brushed past him, and with a battle cry of *Bàs no Beatha*—Death or Life—he charged up the steps, brandishing the dirk.

It wasn't a fair fight. The guards had imbibed too much wine. They fell before even drawing their swords. And while half of Ewan's men secured the tower, the others, now armed and fierce, ambushed the guards patrolling the ramparts.

As the remaining prisoners welled up from the dungeon below, Ewan caught sight of the raven-haired lad that had unlocked their cell. The youth took one look at the blood on the floor and turned white.

"Have a care," Ewan advised, pulling him away from the bodies. They couldn't afford the lad to faint. They had to make good their escape. "Where are the horses ye speak of?"

The lad swallowed but managed a reply, "At the inn."

"Inn?" Ewan growled in annoyance. "And what good are they there?"

To his surprise, color returned to the lad's cheeks, and a spark of anger flashed in his eyes. "I had a plan, ye stubborn oaf!" he barked.

“I paid good coin to sneak ye out in a cart. Aye, I had this planned right well—”

“’Twasn’t well thought out enough,” Ewan judged callously, peering out of the door for any sign of archers.

The lad burst out angrily. “Aren’t ye a wee bit of an ungrateful wretch now? Shouldna I be thanked for risking my life to save your thankless neck?”

“Ach, but ye babble like a fishwife!” Ewan scowled down at him. The lad was taller than most but he did not match his own imposing height. Again, for the briefest of moments, an expression crossed the youth’s face that seemed oddly familiar. Frowning, Ewan asked, “Who are ye? What are ye called?”

The lad blinked and clamped his mouth shut.

When it appeared he was once again floundering for words, Ewan growled impatiently, “I’ve no time for idle chatter. Stay behind me, ye fool, so ye dinna get hurt.”

Charging then out of the tower, he led the remainder of his men and the other prisoners out into the courtyard. Mayhem ensued and then the fighting began in earnest, but soon enough the English guards retreated enough for all to escape.

With the dark-haired lad still in tow, Ewan and his men fled through the gates, breaking up into small groups and fanning out into Carlisle’s bustling streets. He didn’t have to speak or give them orders. He knew he’d meet them soon at Sowerby Wood. They’d had little to do in prison but pace in tight circles and plan their escape.

Taking refuge in a nearby alley, Ewan let go of the lad’s arm just as Alec turned the corner at a run.

“There ye are,” Alec grinned, panting a little. Reaching over, he punched the lad’s shoulder. “’Tis a miraculous day, this. I am in your debt. Ye’ve saved my life. Why—”

Ewan held up his hand. “There will be time for talk later,” he said tersely. “We must leave afore the English find us.” Waving at the river, he turned to ask the lad, “Can ye swim?”

But the lad folded his arms across his chest and objected stoutly, “I’ll not be leaving without my horse.”

“’Tis only a horse,” Ewan began.

“Dinna be such a pig-headed fool!” the lad interrupted, drawing his fine brows in an angry line. “I’ll never leave Diabhul behind, Ewan.”

At that, Alec gave a snort of laughter.

But Ewan paused and narrowed his eyes. “Ye speak as if ye know me,” he said quietly. “Who are ye?”

There was something in the lad’s eyes, an expression that Ewan could not interpret, but then the youth dropped his gaze.

Clearing his throat, he replied in a gruff tone, “I’m called Moridac. Moridac MacGregor. And I dinna know ye.” He paused and lowered his voice, raising his chin in challenge. “Aye, I didna know ye were such a stubborn ox. I’ll fetch Diabhul myself if I have to.”

“MacGregor?” Alec repeated, cocking his head as if he’d misheard. “And what cause has a MacGregor to aid us?”

Ewan lifted a suspicious brow. ‘Twas clear the lad was lying, but there was little time to delve into the matter. Instead, he said, “’Twould be an ill deed to leave ye on your own, Moridac. Let us be quick and fetch the horses, though ‘tis a mistake, I’ll warrant.” And with an abrupt gesture, he commanded crisply, “Lead on.”

Moridac nodded, and then turning swiftly on his heel, moved through the streets as the church bells began to ring.

No one paid them any heed as they wove through ox-drawn carts and peasants hawking their wares. And in no time at all, they stood before the stables behind a small wattle-and-daub inn at the edge of town.

The stable doors groaned, creaking loudly as Moridac pushed them back and disappeared into the dim interior.

Ducking a little, Ewan and Alec followed.

“Your horses. I bought three, but we’ll have to leave one behind,” the lad said, pointing to a gray and two dappled geldings. “The saddles and packs are on the post there.”

The interior was cramped, and as Ewan and Alec squeezed past the lad, the youth winced and pinched his nose.

“By the Rood, but ye both need a bath!” he exclaimed. “And right quickly.”

Ewan glanced down at the youth standing chest-to-chest. “Aye,” he agreed, surprised at the lad’s fine sensitivities. “We’ve been imprisoned for nigh on a month. ‘Tis no small surprise we’re caked with grime and reek of the dungeon.” Bathing had hardly been his topmost concern.

“Are ye such a lass that ye canna tolerate the stench of sweat?” Alec laughed, giving Moridac a good-natured shove, but his eyes widened as he spied the horse in the stall behind him. “That canna be your horse, lad.” He let out a low, appreciative whistle.

“Aye, ‘tis,” Moridac said proudly. “I’ve raised him from a foal. Diabhul is his name.”

Ewan eyed the massive black stallion pawing the stable floor and tossing his mane. Nodding once in admiration, he agreed, “’Tis truly a fine beast. I see now why ye couldna let him go.”

“Aye then,” Moridac said, dusting his hands. Reaching over, he tugged the knotted rope tethering Diabhul.

“Are ye some nobleman’s son?” Alec asked conversationally as he

moved away toward a dappled gelding.

Ignoring him, Moridac scowled at the knot and pulled harder at one end.

Ewan paused, noting the lad's hands were slender and soft, just like the rest of him. Had he never done a day's honest work?

"God's Blood but this rope is cursed!" the youth spat in frustration.

Raising a brow, Ewan offered, "Can I help ye?"

He'd scarcely extended his hand before the black stallion flattened his ears and lunged, intent on nipping him. But Ewan was well versed in the ways of high-spirited horses. Sidestepping him easily, he caught the animal's head with a strong hand.

"Nay, ye'll not be tasting my flesh, ye black-hearted beastie," he said without rancor.

The horse snorted and tried to yank his head free, but after several futile attempts, he decided instead to look away and ignore Ewan's existence—at least for the moment. Tempted to smile for the first time in weeks, Ewan murmured, "Aye then, 'tis a truce for now."

Letting the stallion's head free, Ewan glanced down at Moridac.

The youth was watching him, and his large expressive eyes were filled with emotion. Admiration? Or was it something else?

A little discomfited, Ewan reached for the knot, but as his hand brushed Moridac's, the lad jerked back as if he'd been burnt.

Clearly flustered, Moridac took a quick step away and mumbled, "Aye, have at it."

Raising a brow at the youth's reaction, Ewan had the rope untied in moments and then moved to saddle his own horse. Adjusting the cinch, he watched the lad from the corner of his eye.

The youth moved with unusual grace, each movement fluid, almost like a dance as he strapped a quiver of arrows over one shoulder along with a bow. "And where do we ride?" he asked without looking up.

"South," Ewan answered with a single word.

There was tension in the lad's jaw. 'Twas a delicate, smooth jaw. Not one sign of a single whisker. And then Moridac leaned over to check a buckle, and the curve of the lad's neck caught Ewan's gaze in a way that made his throat suddenly tight.

Shocked at his own response, Ewan hastily averted his gaze. He hadn't slept well in weeks. He was obviously exhausted.

Clenching his teeth, he finished readying his horse and led it from the stall to fall into step behind Alec. They'd just stepped out of the stables and into the pale sunlight when Alec gave a blistering curse and froze.

Peering over his shoulder, Ewan spied a lank, greasy-haired man

with an unkempt red beard. He'd been one of their crueler captors. Standing on the low garden wall at the back of the inn, the man had drawn his bow, and the arrow, notched on the string, was aimed directly at Alec's chest.

"I'll have your heads on pikes before this day is done!" the guard announced savagely. "Not another step. There's no escape for you now!"

It was true. At that range, there was no way the man could miss. But still, Ewan had to try.

Moving out from behind Alec, he began, "Mayhap we can—"

Immediately the guard shifted, aiming his arrow at Ewan instead, and then Alec drew his sword and any chance Ewan might have had to talk sense into the man was lost.

Leaping forward, Ewan drew his sword also as the guard shouted and let loose his arrow. But as the arrow left the string, a new feathered shaft whistled past Ewan's ear from behind to embed itself into the guard's chest, causing the man's arrow to fly wildly over Ewan's head.

With a gargled gasp, the guard toppled back off the wall, his lifeless leg dangling over the side.

Stunned, Ewan and Alec froze for a moment and then whirled in unison to see Moridac leaning against the stable door, his bow still in his shaking hands. His brown eyes were round, and he looked like he was going to be sick.

The stricken expression on his face made Ewan pause with an odd twinge of conscience. It felt a lifetime since killing a man had affected him so. For a fleeting moment, he felt the senseless urge to reach out and touch the lad's cheek in an offer of comfort. But then flinching at the strange thought, he grimly shoved his sword back into its scabbard.

"We've not a moment to lose. We ride south, at once," he ordered a bit harsher than he'd intended. "Mount your horse, lad."

Swallowing visibly, Moridac nodded. With his fingers still trembling, he caught the saddle and hauled himself onto the stallion's back. And as the flat of Ewan's palm landed square on the great beast's flank, the animal charged forward, waking the lad from his shocked stupor.

With the practiced ease of a superior horseman, Moridac wheeled the black stallion around, and leaping over the low garden wall, guided the animal to the narrow tree-covered road leading south toward Sowerby Wood.

They rode swiftly.

The lad was an accomplished rider, well suited to the black stallion he rode, and more than once, Ewan found himself wondering

just who the young horseman truly was.

Several leagues later, they left the road and entered Sowerby Wood. The low-hanging branches whipped their faces as they pushed forward. For a time, they followed a river meandering through the darkening forest until wisps of smoke hanging in the air drew them to the small clearing, deep in the heart of a beech tree grove.

Three highlanders crowded around a small fire, two of them roasting a pheasant on a spit. A third sat nearby, whittling a chunk of wood in the afternoon sun.

Pulling his horse to a halt, Ewan raised his arm. “Well met, lads.”

“And ye made my supper, aye?” Alec dismounted with a wide grin. “Ye shouldna have taken the trouble. Now off with ye to find something of your own.”

“Ye can lick the spit,” one of the men offered as Alec laughingly joined them by the fire.

Leaping lightly down from the back of his horse, Ewan breathed deeply of the comforting smell of damp earth.

Aye, it had been too long since he’d smelled the fresh sweet air.

It was then that he saw Moridac, leaning against his horse. His face was white, and his eyes were closed. After a moment, he fell to his knees and retched in the grass.

“I’ll roast in Hell,” the lad panted, clutching his churning stomach. “I’ve killed a man.”

Ewan paused. He’d seen the same reaction on the battlefield time and time again. Crouching next to the lad, he grasped his shoulder in a brotherly gesture of support and said, “Ye canna be blaming yourself, lad.”

Moridac blanched and looked up at him in astonishment. “Are ye daft? Who else is to blame? ’Twas my own hand that shed his blood and no other. He bore no ill will toward me, and most likely not even for ye, Ewan.”

The man had been a cruel guard, but he knew what the lad meant, and he knew from experience what he was feeling. Remorse. Guilt. Sorrow. Dark feelings that could consume the soul.

“Aye, ‘twasn’t an honorable act of mine,” the youth continued, his voice quavering as his hands clenched tightly into fists. “I’ve shed a man’s blood. Aye, he was most likely a simple man fulfilling his duty afore he went home to his wife and wee bairns.” Tears glistened, sliding down the lad’s cheeks. “I killed a man who probably only believed in loyalty and honor.”

Ewan blinked.

There had been a time in his life that he had believed in loyalty and honor. He’d even believed that good would triumph over evil. But no more. Years of seeing the worst in men had left his heart colder

than stone.

But there was something in the youth's face that reminded him he hadn't always thought that way. Something that threatened to unleash years of buried emotion.

'Twas a startling thought.

Drawing back, he said stiffly, "The man wasna the loyal kind, lad. His heart was black. Enough of this. Ye saved my life and for that I'm grateful. 'Twas no other way ye could have saved me."

"Aye, and I dinna regret it, Ewan. But it doesna lessen the guilt," Moridac whispered, dabbing his eyes with the corner of his sleeve.

The delicate gesture caught Ewan's eye. Instinct almost lifted his hands to pull the youth close into an embrace of comfort.

Fortunately, sanity seized control seconds later.

"Breathe deep, lad," he ordered crisply. "Such things happen. They just simply happen." Then quickly rising to his feet, Ewan moved to join the others by the fire, asking himself under his breath, "Are ye bereft of all sense?"

Tossing a plaid under the shade of a tree, he lay back to wait for the arrival of the rest of his men. It had been nearly a month since he'd seen the sun. And for a time, he thought of nothing. He merely watched the leaves above outlined by the sky that gradually faded from blue to purple.

But as the shadows lengthened with the sinking sun, he finally sat up, resting his forearm on his knee.

Someone had gone hunting. The men were roasting meat—several large fish and a rabbit. Moridac turned the spit, his youthful face and his coal black hair aglow by the light of the fire. He was laughing with Alec, but his soulful brown eyes still held a sadness in them.

Curious, Ewan watched him from the shadows.

In the dim light, the lad seemed more a lass. Tall. Slender. And with full lips that made him wonder how long it had been since he'd kissed a woman.

There had been a time he'd enjoyed the glances of the lasses and stealing kisses in the summer sun. Before he'd been sent to battle. Defending kith and kin, he'd denied himself the softness of a woman and the joy of bairns. His relations with women had turned only into forgettable couplings as his inner demons rose to consume him. With the smell of death haunting his dreams, he had found it hard to find joy in anything. Even women.

Annoyed at the turn of his thoughts, he got up and joined the others around the fire. He sat there for a time, listening to their idle talk and on occasion, he caught Moridac studying him with an unusual intensity.

The third time, Ewan frowned and suddenly asked, "And where do

ye hail from, Moridac?"

At once, the fireside conversation died as all eyes turned upon the lad.

Moridac cleared his throat and, glancing about almost nervously, replied, "I come from Glen Orchy, and I was on my way home from delivering a message to my kin when I heard there were good Scots unjustly imprisoned. I had to help ye."

The words rang false to Ewan's ears as the lad's tone was even, flat, as if carefully rehearsed.

"There's always good Scots rotting in Carlisle Dungeon," Alec commented sourly.

This was greeted by a chorus of somber 'aye's'.

The conversation resumed and turned to other things, but it took only a few minutes before Ewan caught Moridac studying him once more.

Again, there was a flash of something in the lad's eyes, something he thought he should recognize.

The thought gnawed. Finally, he asked in an abrupt tone, "Have we met afore, Moridac?"

The lad jerked a little, and his long lashes blinked rapidly. "Nay, I dinna think so," he said.

Ewan narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Then how did ye know 'twas me in the dungeon? And how did ye know my name?"

Again silence fell amongst the men as they waited upon the lad's answer.

Moridac took a deep breath and his brown eyes began to flash. "Who hasna heard tales of Ewan MacLean?" he asked passionately. "There's not a battle sung of in the Isles that doesna have some tidings of your heroic deeds."

"The Isles?" Ewan asked, seizing upon the word. "And what cause does a MacGregor of Glen Orchy, and a scrawny one at that, have to be wandering the Isles?"

The lad drew his fine brows together in a scowl.

But before he could reply, Alec interrupted mildly, "Interrogating the lad is hardly a fit reward for such a daring rescue, Ewan. Enough now, aye?"

Ewan raised a brow as Alec tossed him a flagon of whisky. Catching it with an easy hand, he took a deep swig, before pitching it back.

"Ye'll have to forgive him, lad," Alec continued with an easy laugh. "He's been sore angry this past month."

"Aye, I can see," Moridac replied in a slightly acid tone. He sent Ewan a piercing look from beneath his gathered brows.

Ewan paused. There it was again. Something in the lad's

expression that gave him the uncomfortable feeling that he knew him much more than he claimed.

"Aye, Ewan bears more than his full measure of sorrow," Alec began in a storyteller's voice. "Have ye heard the tale of the Battle of Lochmaben, when he—"

But Ewan cut him short. "Enough," he said, pressing his lips together to indicate the conversation was done. He didn't relish hearing the tales of his so-called heroic deeds.

They only revived dark memories of the screams of dying men.

"And I suppose I owe ye enough to listen," Alec said with a wide grin. "Ye saved my life more than once, even though ye spent the last month in a dungeon calling me an undisciplined sot over it."

"Can ye deny it?" Ewan asked shortly.

"Nay, I canna deny it," Alec agreed with an easy shrug. "'Twas my fault that we walked into the Cunningham's trap. I'll never live it down."

And then the sound of snapping twigs and voices caused them to turn as two more of Ewan's men arrived.

The men greeted one another with fond claps on the back, and as the newcomers offered the contents of the packs slung over their shoulders, an elderly gray-haired man known as Moris sought Ewan out.

"Tidings, Ewan," he said gruffly. "The call went out while we rotted in Carlisle's dungeons. The crown prince himself is now in Stirling and he's taken up arms against his father, the king."

This revelation was met by a somber silence.

Stooping, Alec picked up the flagon and taking a long draught, wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "'The lion of Scotland shall be slain by one of his own'," he intoned in a low voice.

"That was the prophecy, was it not?" one of the men asked.

"Aye, 'twas the one that the king murdered his brother Mar over, years ago," Moris replied. "And he slew the wrong man for it."

"Then 'tis war," Ewan murmured bitterly. "The king truly is a coward and a fool of the highest order to let matters go this far and to fight his own son."

Several of the men spat in disrespectful agreement.

Then Moris asked, "We ride to Stirling, my lord?"

"Aye," Ewan answered roughly. Once he'd returned to Stirling, he'd be the first asked to lead the charge. And more men would die under his blade.

Hauling himself to his feet, he moved away, but Alec caught hold of his plaid as he passed.

"What is it?" the young man asked, his green eyes filled with concern.

For as much trouble that Alec had caused him of late, Ewan loved the man as much as a brother. An aggravating brother, and as such, there was little he could hide from him.

But Ewan didn't wish to speak. Not yet.

"There's naught amiss," he grated, clenching his jaw. "'Tis time we slept. Draw lots amongst yourselves and choose one that will stay behind to wait for the others. At dawn, the rest of us will ride hard for Stirling."

Suppressing a weary sigh, he moved outside the circle of firelight and, wrapping his arms around his knees, leaned against a tree as fatigue settled in his bones.

So, 'twas war once again.

He could see Moridac huddled next to the fire, still looking miserable for having killed a single man.

Ewan sighed.

There were not enough tears in the world to weep for each man he had killed. Aye, he'd never be able to atone for the men he'd slain.

Not that he felt anything at all anymore. He was hardened to it.

There were times when he believed he would welcome tears and pain, simply to see if he were capable of feeling anything anymore. He sighed, keenly aware that thinking morose thoughts had become all too common a habit of late.

Closing his eyes, he commanded himself to sleep, but the effort was fruitless, and he ended up sitting stiff and still in the dark, listening to the soft steady conversation of his men interspersed with the occasional crack of the embers.

"Would ye care for something to eat?"

Ewan's eyes flew open to see Moridac kneeling beside him, offering him a wedge of cheese skewered on the tip of his dirk.

Ewan eyed it with a marked lack of appetite and made no move to take it.

Moridac waited a moment and then set the dirk on the ground near his boot. "Are ye riding to war on the morrow then?" the lad asked.

"Aye," Ewan replied in a clipped tone but then added, "I'll see ye safe to Stirling, if ye wish."

Moridac simply nodded.

When he didn't move to leave, Ewan folded his arms. "And?"

"Are ye afraid?" the lad asked, his voice quivering a little.

"Afraid?" Ewan repeated in a tight voice. "And what is it ye think I should fear?"

The lad's brown eyes grew round, betraying a wealth of emotion. "Death, for one—"

At that, Ewan gave a harsh laugh. "I died a long time ago," he said

through clenched teeth. “How can I die again? Be gone.”

To his surprise, the lad didn’t leave. Instead, he moved closer and laid a soft hand on Ewan’s arm.

“Aye, I canna fault ye for being embittered and angry,” he whispered. “Sleep well, Ewan.”

Ewan froze, and then uncertain of what to think or say, he numbly watched the lad rise gracefully to his feet to rejoin the others.

“Fetch some firewood now, would ye, lad?” Alec asked with a grunt as Moridac joined them. “And stay in the grove. I dinna want those standing watch to think you’re an Englishman.”

“Aye, I’ll be careful,” the youth promised with a bright smile.

From under his lashes, Ewan watched as Moridac’s slim form melted into the darkness, and after a moment, he rose to follow.

The lad was swift of foot, and it took Ewan longer than he’d expected to find him. Finally, he came upon the youth at the edge of the grove, standing in the bright moonlight with his face half hidden by his hood.

Without turning around, Moridac asked in a soft voice, “Can ye not sleep, Ewan?”

“And do ye have eyes behind your head, lad?” Ewan asked with a surprised grunt.

“Hush,” the lad held up a finger and leaned forward, straining to hear.

Quickly, Ewan scanned the grove and then joined Moridac in listening, resting his hand lightly on the hilt of his sword. He heard nothing at first, save the comforting woodland sounds of small rodents scurrying in the dark and the call of the owls.

And then he heard it.

Hooves.

Crouching low with a silent curse upon his lips, he pulled the lad back into the shadows.

“There,” Moridac warned, pressing against him.

They watched from under the cloak of darkness as the horses, snorting clouds of steam, appeared next to the river before moving downstream into the moonlit night.

When they were gone, Moridac drew even closer to Ewan and asked, “Were they looking for us?”

It was then that Ewan noticed the lad had grabbed a handful of his shirt, holding it tightly as if to seek comfort.

And he was close. Too close.

Soft raven hair tickled Ewan’s unshaven cheek, causing an unexpected tingle to race down his neck.

Feeling suddenly short of breath, he abruptly stepped back.

“Who are ye?” he breathed. “Who are ye truly?”

Chapter Three – "What Do Ye Want in a Lass?"

From the very moment that she'd met Ewan, nothing had gone according to plan or expectations.

Nothing.

From her plan to sneak him out of the castle to her expectations of the man himself.

No, she hadn't expected him to be so harsh and angry—nor so overwhelmingly appealing, so overpoweringly … sensual.

Nay, this was a far different Ewan than she recalled as a lassie. He was towering over her now in the moonlight, a tall man of proud bearing, built of pure muscle and with guarded blue eyes that impaled her own.

And it was obvious that he didn't believe a word of her story.

But 'twas nigh impossible to think of any new lies when, inexplicably, she wanted only to imagine running her fingers over the expanse of his chest, over the carved muscles playing beneath his begrimed shirt—something she'd never been interested in imagining before.

"Have ye lost your tongue?" he asked, breaking her out of her thoughts. The tension was visible along the rugged curve of his jaw.

Merry coughed, startled from her musings. "Aye, I'm uncannily weary," she muttered, her breath hitching a little.

"And will ye give me an answer?" His brows were furrowed. "Who are ye?"

They were standing close. She could feel the heat radiating from his broad chest, and it was sending her senses whirling.

She didn't reply.

Instead, she allowed her gaze to drift over the gaunt hollows of his face and to the deep lines of exhaustion etched beneath his eyes. 'Twas the face of suffering, and a wave of sympathy washed through her, dispelling her lusty thoughts.

"And?" he probed in a hard tone.

"What troubles ye so, Ewan?" she felt compelled to ask, lifting a hand to his shoulder.

He stood still under her touch, frozen, and his eyes wide.

She wanted to hug him, pull him close. She'd always remembered him to have a spark of laughter in his eyes. But it was clear now that the laughter had long left those blue eyes boring into hers.

"Ach, this weight on your shoulders is too heavy," she murmured. "Have ye forgotten how to live, Ewan?"

At that, he stepped away, his face carefully blank.

Merry realized her mistake at once and bit back a wry grimace.

‘Twas fair difficult to remember to play the part of a lad—especially with Ewan.

“To me, living means not getting killed, nothing more,” he answered in a distant tone. And then his brows slanted in a line of question. “If ye’ll not tell me who ye are than will ye tell me who sent ye, lad?”

“Eh, well,” she cleared her throat, playing for time. “I was paid good coin not to tell.” It wasn’t the best of answers, and she couldn't look him in the eye as she lied outright. “Come now. I’ve firewood to fetch.”

She moved away, leaving him standing there silent, feet firm and wide shoulders squared. He watched her stack the firewood for a time and then moved to help, collecting branches in silence.

After a time, he grunted. “’Tis enough. I’ll carry those.” He nodded his chin toward the larger ones and picked up several smaller branches. “Hold out your arms and take these. I’ll stack the larger for ye, lad.”

Merry held still, watching the moonlight play off his blond hair, turning it almost silver. When had Ewan become so strikingly handsome?

But then another thought crossed her mind. A disquieting one.

Did he have a lady?

“And why would my mysterious benefactor pay good coin for my rescue only to then send just a lad?” Ewan suddenly asked.

Merry jerked a little, nearly dropping the wood.

“Just a lad?” she repeated, replaying his last words. She tossed her head, nettled. “I already know that I can ride better then ye, and I warrant I can shoot a straighter arrow!”

He furrowed his brows and then responded by dumping a heavy log on top of the others in her arms.

Her muscles quivered under the weight a moment before rebelling of their own accord. And bowing under the burden, she dropped the entire load.

“Sweet Mary!” Merry cursed, scowling up at him.

“You’re as weak as a lass,” he replied, lifting a brow.

She paused in alarm. Did he know? Had he discovered she wasn’t a lad?

Dropping to her knees, she bowed her head and reached for the scattered wood. And, as a stilted silence fell between them, she began to fret.

Finally, Ewan spoke. “I know ye’ve spun a net of lies, lad,” he said, lifting the large logs with effortless ease. “But ‘tis no matter, I suppose. We all carry our secrets. I’ll see ye safe to the Scottish border as payment for your aid, but after that, we’ll part ways.”

His tone was cold. Dismissive. It felt like a slap across the face. And he'd originally promised to see her to Stirling. Now it was just the borders?

She scowled.

Treating her as if she didn't even exist, he shouldered his logs, and training his gaze straight ahead, retraced his steps back to camp with his broadsword swinging from his belt.

She wanted to shout after him and tell him who she truly was, just to see if the Ewan she knew was buried somewhere deep inside. But the words lodged in her throat. But then thinking of the English soldiers, she hurriedly collected her branches and, returning to camp, dropped them unceremoniously next to the fire.

Alec glanced up at her, cocking his head to one side. "And I thought ye were lost in the woodlands," he said jokingly. "Ye took so long."

Merry didn't reply. She merely scowled at Ewan sitting under a tree a short distance away.

He didn't meet her gaze, but he crossed his arms and drew his brows into a line himself.

"Did ye quarrel?" Alec asked with an easy grin even as his piercing gaze shifted between Ewan and herself.

Merry tensed, feeling strangely exposed. "Nay," she hurried to deny.

He merely raised a brow as his shrewd eyes swept over her.

Such scrutiny was dangerous, and Merry searched about for a diversion. Fortunately, one arrived as a gust of wind rustled the leaves, carrying with it the foul stench of mold and refuse.

Wrinkling her nose, she grumbled, "Ach, ye need a bath, the lot of ye. Ye reek of the dungeon and 'tis nigh unbearable."

Alec merely laughed as she retreated to a tree outside the circle of firelight, and leaning against the trunk, she settled back into her cloak and watched Ewan from the corner of her eye. She had yet to see him bestow a smile. The changes in him were worrisome, and she wondered what misfortunes had befallen him to transform him so.

Misfortunes of battle? Misfortunes of … love?

Aye, 'twas the last she found more bothersome.

For a time, she pondered them both, but gradually exhaustion overcame her, and closing her eyes at last, she let the soft rustling of the leaves carry her off to sleep.

The night was a fitful one, and she was relieved when the dull glow of dawn finally crept over the horizon.

Rising to her feet in the clean and crisp morning air, Merry glanced around and saw that she was alone except for Alec still crouched next to the fire, looking as if he hadn't moved all night.

“And a braw morning to ye, lad,” he greeted her with a grin, running his hands through his chestnut hair to leave it stand on end.

It was strangely charming.

She paused.

She hadn’t taken the time to notice before, but the man was handsome. Strongly built with bright green eyes and a cleft in his chin, he was the essence of a rugged highlander.

And then realizing she was staring, Merry quickly turned away.

“Not keen to wake, are ye?” Alec said with a laugh.

Astonished at herself, she grunted a wordless response and stooped to retrieve her cloak from the ground.

Just when had men become so fascinating? Many a lad had tried to capture her eye in the past few years, but she hadn’t felt her heart flutter in response. Not once.

But upon seeing Ewan again, matters had changed.

Merry frowned, wondering if she should hie herself back to Scotland as fast as Diabhul could carry her, and with a quickened step, she headed to the river to wash the sleep from her eyes.

Brushing thoughts of men aside, she glanced up into the blue sky above. The morning was indeed a fine one, and the day promised to be warm.

Breathing deep, she enjoyed the pleasing fragrance of late-spring lavender, and walking along the riverbank, stumbled upon a pool hidden under the weeping branches of an ancient willow. Slipping a little on the moss-covered stones, she knelt at its edge. The water was inviting, reflecting the deep blue sky above like a mirror, and she sighed, half-tempted to slip into the coolness to scrub the grime of the past week away.

She cupped her hands, and filling them with the cool water, took a sip.

And then promptly choked.

Spewing water in all directions, she caught sight of bare-chested men in the pool’s surface, and whirling, saw Ewan emerge from the grove behind them. He was unlacing his shirt.

“Into the water with ye, lads, both ye and your plaids, and be quick,” he ordered his men crisply. “They’ll know ye escaped from the dungeons by the mere stench.”

Merry cleared her throat as the men brushed past her, some walking out of their plaids on their way to the river, others jumping into the water fully-clothed, and still a few, gingerly testing the chill with their toes.

Hastily glancing away, she stood and turned only to collide straight into Alec, who was shrugging out of his shirt.

“’Tis time to wash up, lad,” he said, shaking his reddish-brown

hair from his naked shoulders. And then nodding at several of the men splashing in the water behind him, he added, “Sean and Dubh arrived in the dead of night. And Robert, there, too. Ho, lads, allow me to present ye to our rescuer! Oh, aye, there’s Jamie and Ian as well.”

As Alec shouted their names, the men raised their arms in greeting.

There was Aidan, a mild-tempered, soft-spoken man whose age was hard to determine, and Lothar, a rugged Frank who hardly ever spoke a word.

And then Ewan was there, pulling his shirt over his head, and it was impossible to pay heed to anyone else.

Aye, she’d thought Alec a handsome man with a rough charm, but a bare-chested Ewan could be described as nothing short of magnificent. And his chest was everything she’d imagined it would be, broad, hard, and with muscles carved of iron.

‘Twas impossible not to stand there and to simply gape at the man’s beauty.

Flaxen-haired, lean, and long of limb, he moved with confidence and ease, yet there was a hint of a wildness about him that made her scarcely able to breathe.

As she watched, he tossed his shirt onto the grass. And then unbuckling his sword, he glanced over at her and ordered curtly, “Into the water, lad.”

Merry drew back sharply. “Water? Nay, I’ll not be bathing with the lot of ye.”

She cleared her throat. To be surrounded by a dozen or so highlanders in various states of undress was all a wee bit disconcerting, and she felt her cheeks turning pink.

“And why is that?” Ewan was asking. “Ye stink as badly as the rest.”

Why was the man so perpetually insulting? Outraged, her mouth gaped open. “I think not! And I’ll not be ordered about by the likes of ye, Ewan MacLean!”

He raised a cool brow, clearly unused to his orders being challenged.

“Be ye pock-marked?” Alec interrupted curiously. “’Tis of no concern to us, lad.”

“Aye,” said one of the men in the river. “I’ve what some call the Devil’s Mark.” And he pointed to a large scarlet birthmark which covered his shoulder blade.

They were watching her, all of them. Flustered, she said the first thing that came to mind. “’Tis … ‘tis a vow.”

Most of the men lost interest then, but Alec’s curiosity only grew. “A holy vow?” he asked. “Do ye—”

But Ewan cut him short. “Leave the lad be,” he said, casting a wary eye about. “Into the water with ye, Alec Montgomery, and be quick now. We shouldna tarry long.”

Flashing his customary grin, Alec launched his plaid into the water and dove after it. And for a brief moment, Merry caught a glimpse of his buttocks.

Hastily, she averted her gaze and turned yet again, only to see Ewan’s plaid fall away leaving him grandly naked.

“Ye can stand watch, lad,” he said, grimly staring down at her.

She felt the tips of her ears burn, and it was fair difficult to keep her eyes focused on his face.

“Aye,” she agreed in a gargled voice. “I’ll stand watch.”

He turned, and she did allow her eyes to rove over him then, over his bare arms knotted with muscle, his lean hips, and honed legs.

And with a flash of privately wicked humor, she muttered under her breath, “Aye, I’ll stand watch. ‘Tis a duty that must be endured.”

“’Tis a pleasant shock of chill!” Alec called, flapping his hands in the river. “Ye dinna know what you’re missing by keeping to your vow, lad!”

“Let the lad be,” Ewan warned again.

He stood waist deep in the shallows, kneading his wide bare shoulders. The bands of muscle flexed in his arms as he splashed the water over his shoulders.

Merry swallowed a sigh.

The man’s every movement was filled with power and elegance, and even though the morning was quite warm, she shivered. Swiftly checking her cheeks with the back of her hands, she sighed at herself. Aye, she was blushing. ‘Twouldn’t do.

She stood on alert then, watching for any signs of enemies as the men bathed and washed their plaids. But there was nothing, save the occasional call of a bird mingled with the men’s raucous jests and laughter.

“My boots,” Ewan’s voice suddenly ordered.

Casting an involuntary glance in his direction, she saw that he’d emerged from the water. With his plaid draped low on his hips and his wet shirt tight across his shoulders, he was even more seductively overpowering than before.

“My boots,” he repeated, and pointed next to her feet. “Toss them here, aye?”

Why was the man so keenly distracting? He was just a man. And she’d seen men with muscles before. Her eyes flitted over him, admiring the way the droplets of water ran down his shoulders, over the brawny, gleaming mass of sculpted chest.

And then she glanced up into his eyes.

He was observing her with an unnervingly steady gaze. “Boots?” he asked yet again, raising a brow.

Hurriedly, she reached down and grasped the boots. Ach, his feet were large, much larger than her own.

Ewan made a sound of impatience, causing her to fumble and a boot slipped through her fingers.

“Do ye have butter on your fingers, lad?” Alec laughed.

But Merry scarcely paid heed. For a moment, she was torn with the desire to tell Ewan who she truly was.

Would he be angry?

She glanced up, searching his face and licking her suddenly dry lips.

His gaze dropped, lingering a moment upon her mouth, but then a moment later she saw his lips move in a ”Sweet Mary!” before he turned away, waving a dismissing hand.

He was so cold. So removed.

Annoyed, Merry launched a boot at his head. “Ach, but you’re an ungrateful oaf,” she snapped.

The boot fell ridiculously short of its mark.

“Ach, ye throw like a lass,” Alec teased.

“The sun was in my eyes,” Merry retorted, kicking the remaining boot in Ewan’s general direction before rounding on Alec. “And do ye ever do naught but blather, ye addlepated numbskull?”

Laughter filled the air with Alec’s among the loudest.

But Ewan interrupted them in a cold, even tone. “’Tis time we ride. All ye break your fast and be quick about it, or ye’ll be left behind.”

Draping his plaid over his shoulder, he pushed past them all and disappeared under the trees.

“Uncommon cruel he is,” Alec said in jest, joining Merry to clap her companionably on the shoulder. “Let’s go, shall we, lad?”

They returned to the camp, and after a hurried breakfast of half-burnt fish and ale—that set Merry to longing for her usual fare in Dunvegan of oatcakes, honeyed almonds, and mutton—they saddled their horses and left Sowerby Wood behind them.

They rode hard, skirting Carlisle to the south, and for a time, saw nothing else alive save the occasional hawk in the sky. Ewan rode with ease in the saddle, pausing once or twice to either send a scout ahead or to issue a brusque command to alter course. And by midafternoon, they were turning north once more.

Merry reveled to be once again upon Diabhul’s back with the wind ruffling her hair. Once or twice, she thought to let the black horse stretch his legs, but, in a commanding voice that sliced the air like a dagger, Ewan called her back, ordering her to stay behind the others.

“And why do ye wish to run off anyway?” Alec asked, spying her darkened scowl.

“There’s no harm in it,” Merry disagreed sourly.

“Truly?” he asked, bemused. “Hard riding makes for an endless, tedious aching of the joints.”

She rolled her eyes at him but couldn’t prevent a smile. The man was charming.

As the afternoon waned, clouds gathered, and shortly after, a steady rain began to fall. It was a cold rain, one that made Merry dream of a toasty fire and blankets aplenty and suddenly, she was more than willing to be off the back of a horse.

For a time, they took a smaller road winding through the forest and as the rain turned into a drizzle, they stumbled upon an abandoned thatch-roofed cottage in ill repair. The thickets surrounding it were overgrown but broken near the ground, and the dirt nearby was covered in tracks. Animal tracks.

She wasn’t the only one to take note.

“There,” Alec pointed to the droppings and the broken branches. “‘Tis a boar. A small one from the looks of it but enough to feed us all.”

They all looked at Ewan, hopeful.

“Aye,” he agreed with a curt nod. “But be quick.”

Alec didn’t need to be told twice. As one of the men tossed him a bow, several others dismounted, preparing to join the hunt.

Merry held out her hand. A drop of rain fell on her palm. Most likely, it would be pouring soon. Sliding from Diabhul’s back, she caught up her bow and volunteered. “I’ll go with ye, Alec. ‘Twill be quicker with another archer.”

“And you’re such a fine hunter?” he asked, his green eyes sweeping her up and down in outright disbelief. “You dinna have any strength in those feeble fists of yours.”

“’Tis *skill* that is needed, ye oaf.” Merry rolled her eyes.

“Silence!” Ewan interrupted then, motioning to his men. “We’ll break into three parties. Two hunting, the remainder stay here.”

As Merry stepped forward to join Alec, a crash of thunder rent the air, followed by a gust of wind. And as Ewan and another fell into step beside them, the four set off in a westerly direction as the other hunting party took the opposite path.

They’d scarcely gone more than a dozen paces when a brace of hares darted across their path. And before Alec had scarcely lifted his bow, Merry had let loose two arrows.

“At least we’ll not return empty-handed,” Ewan said, lifting an impressed brow.

“Good shot, lad,” Alec remarked, clearing his throat. “I didna

shoot as I'm only after the boar."

The other man guffawed at that, and Alec merely answered with a good-natured quirk of the lips.

They continued following the tracks for a time, pausing at intervals to listen. And then from the corner of her eye, a tan blur flashed by.

Merry whirled, but Ewan caught her arm. "Stay your hand," he said, "'Tis the king's deer."

They watched the stag bound away in silence.

And then Merry heard it. The soft grunts of a wild boar rooting in the leaves in search of food.

"I dinna—" Alec began.

"Hssst!" Merry scowled, notching an arrow on the string. "Listen."

They strained forward, listening, but heard nothing.

Merry sent Alec a dark look and whispered, "Let's move to the west, but have a care, will ye? Ye make such a racket the game have all gone, most likely."

"I'm only breathing, ye master huntsman." Alec bristled a bit. "Do ye want me to stop breathing?"

Merry frowned. "If ye can manage it," she retorted crossly. "'Twould help."

"God's Blood—" he began hotly.

But he was interrupted by a squeal as a small black boar burst out of the underbrush and charged straight at them.

It happened quickly.

She raised her bow and released the shaft, but the arrow shot wild as both Ewan and Alec pulled her back to safety.

Breaking free of their protective grips, she stepped directly into the boar's path and shot two more arrows in rapid succession.

The boar stumbled, and then Ewan's man drew his sword and dispatched the beast quickly.

"Aye then," Merry nodded in satisfaction. "'Tis a small one, but he'll do."

It was then that she noticed both Alec and Ewan were still standing close at her side, their hands outstretched as if to protect her. Alec's green eyes wide with concern, and Ewan's brows drawn into a line. And then it struck her as oddly humorous that she had to glance up at them both. She had to look *up* at very few men.

"Beside ye both, I feel strangely delicate," she admitted with a small laugh.

They both peered down at her then, and her breath quickened. There was no denying the attraction, and for a moment, she could have sworn that they both felt it, too.

Alec's light-hearted manner pulled at her heart, but Ewan's

presence seared her soul.

But then another peal of thunder broke the silence, and Ewan stepped back.

"Ye have a keen eye, Moridac," he said, eyeing the dead boar with approval.

"But not so much muscle," Alec inserted with a grunt.

Merry didn't speak. She stood to the side as each man grabbed one of the boar's legs and began to drag it back to the cottage.

Feeling oddly subdued, Merry followed.

The sky threatened more rain as they returned, and the waiting men greeted them with claps on the backs and a few "huzzahs". And as Alec and another hefted the boar's carcass over the back of a horse, the other hunting party returned empty-handed.

They set out once again then, down the ever-dwindling road that gradually turned into a mere footpath, when finally, they arrived at the forest's edge.

They'd barely left the shelter of the trees before two riders crested the hill, letting out low whistles. Merry recognized them as the men Ewan had sent to scout ahead, but then there was little time to ponder anything more as Ewan suddenly wheeled his gelding about and commanded them all to return to the trees.

They'd barely reached the cover of the forest before a company of English soldiers appeared on the road.

Inching closer to Ewan, Merry heard one of the scouts murmur.

"Too many patrols," he was saying. "The call has gone out. They want Alec, dead or alive."

"I feared as much," Ewan replied softly.

They didn't speak then but watched in silence as the English soldiers cantered down the road and disappeared into the distance.

When they were gone, Ewan issued a stern command, "We'll return to the cottage for this night, at least. Be quick, afore the English return."

Turning back, they plunged deeper into the forest, and as night began to fall, they stood once more in front of the ruined cottage. The woodlands had grown close to one side, affording shelter for the horses, and after seeing their mounts unsaddled and set to graze, they filed into the small building.

Entering after the others, Merry wrinkled her nose at the stench of mildew and rotting wood. The interior was dark, gloomy, but the shutters on the windows were still intact. And though rain had dribbled down from holes in the roof to form large mud puddles on the floor, the area near the hearth was relatively dry. There was no furniture left, save for a small three-legged stool and a black kettle turned over on its side.

“Perhaps ‘tis a plague house,” one of the men muttered.

Ewan pointed to the opaque mounds of cobwebs in the rafters. “If ‘twas, then it was longer than your lifetime ago, Sean,” he said calmly.

After a bit of grumbling, they set about butchering the meat.

Kneeling before the hearth, Merry stacked some wood and found a bit of dry thatching to use as tinder. The fire caught, crackling and spitting sparks, and a short time later, a rosy tint bathed the room as the boar and the rabbits roasted on a spit over the flames.

Several of the men began a game of dice, and one of the scouts produced a clay jug of wine as the smell of smoke mingled with the scent of roasted meat.

Leaving Alec to tend to the cooking, Merry settled against the wall, shifting to get comfortable on the dirt-packed floor. With all of the riding, the bandages binding her breasts were coming undone. She’d have to find a way to sneak out and tighten them soon. But she’d have to wait until most of the men were asleep. She couldn’t afford to get caught.

From the corner of her eye, she watched Ewan as he sat near the fire, alert and restless. The firelight played on his face, giving him a dangerous air. His brow was drawn into a deep frown, and she wondered if he ever allowed himself a smile anymore.

“They called him a beast in the battlefield.”

Merry turned to see Alec crouching beside her with his lips lifted into the merest whisper of a smile.

“Aye, no man can match his fierce reputation,” Alec continued, glancing over at Ewan himself. “A man renowned for his strong sword arm and steeled endurance, he is. Strong as an ox and even stronger willed. Some say he could wield a sword afore he could walk.”

Merry bit back a sigh.

‘Twas obvious.

While others saw only the hard warrior, unflinching, unmoving, she saw in his eyes the pain, the sorrow, and the burden of immeasurable guilt. She wanted to ease his burden. To touch him. To sooth his cares away.

Ewan glanced back at them, grim and quick. “And what do ye speak of?” he asked curtly.

Alec leaned over and tousled Merry’s cropped curls. And after a swift, speculative search of her face, turned to Ewan and replied, “The lad admires ye, Ewan.”

Merry choked.

But Ewan scarcely noticed. “There’s naught that warrants admiration,” he replied tightly. And then rising to his feet, he strode to the door and disappeared out into the gathering darkness.

“Are ye bereft of all sense?” Merry scowled up at Alec. “Can ye

not see that he suffers?"

Alec shook his head in mock dismay. "And you're a boldly impertinent lad," he said, stroking the stubble on his chin. "'Tis clear ye revere the man, and rightly so. I only sought to reward your curiosity. But aye, you're right. We all know he suffers. He doesna sleep."

"Aye," a voice chorused from the shadows. "The screams of the dying haunt his dreams."

"Tis the warrior's curse," Alec agreed, moving next to the fire.

"Ewan had the heart of a poet, once," someone else said solemnly.

Silence fell then, for a time, and it was only broken by a sudden gust of wind rattling the shutters, followed by the sound of pattering rain.

And then the meat was pronounced roasted.

The men began to eat and spirits rose, and as a new dice game began in earnest, Ewan returned.

Kicking the fire back to life, he shook the rain from his cloak and draped it over the three-legged stool, and then settling against the wall, he stretched his long legs out in front of him.

Merry cast a furtive glance his way, but his blue eyes were hooded by thick lashes, and half of his face was covered by shadows as he gazed intently at the fire.

For a time, the room was filled with the laughter of the men at dice, and then a particularly loud protest caused heads to turn as one man good-naturedly accused his fellows of cheating.

"And you're a sore loser," one man judged humorously.

"Aye, but I've naught left to wager," the man named Sean said. "And I must win!"

"Ach, but ye do have something of value to offer," one of the others disagreed with a glint of humor in his eye. "Let me dance with your sister, Christine, aye?"

"Mayhap my hearing is rusty," Sean said with a half-growl. "I dinna hear my wee sister's name upon your lips, did I?"

But the would-be suitor was not to be deterred. "She's a lass of almost twenty," the man replied. "And a bonny one, at that."

"Aye," another man agreed. "With hair like honey and lips ripe for a kiss."

"Ye canna speak of her like that." Sean's voice took on a serious tone.

Alec pushed abruptly away from the wall. "And what is it ye look for in a lass, Sean?" he asked, skillfully diverting the conversation to safer territory.

"I only look for a warm, willing lass, with a generous heart," Sean answered, his mood softening.

“A warm, willing lass, but pink-cheeked and pleasing to the eye,” another man chimed in.

“With the face of an angel,” said one more. “A face that can ensnare ye with a glance.”

Merry’s lips twitched as she glanced at the men circled about the fire, their lips curved into silly grins. It was fair difficult to restrain herself from bursting out into laughter.

“Aye, there’s much to appreciate in a lass,” Alec granted in a half-dreamy tone. “Slender ankles and delicate wrists. And the winsome curve of her neck, aye, lads? A generous rump, a sway in her hips, and teeth—”

“Ach, teeth? Ye speak of a horse, not a lass!” Merry did burst with laughter then, unable to hold back any longer.

“And what do ye fancy, Moridac?” Alec’s brows quirked in challenge.

“’Tis simple enough,” she said with a distracted smile of her own. “A braw lad, soft of heart.”

She didn’t speak the rest, but she thought it. Aye, she knew right well what her heart was telling her. She wanted a man with broad shoulders, long limbs, and eyes as blue as the sea. A man with a tortured soul she knew she could heal.

It took her a moment to notice the shocked silence surrounding her.

And then she realized her mistake.

“A … lad?” Alec asked, clearing his throat.

Chapter Four – "You're No Brother to Me"

Moridac stood there, suffering a loss of words as Ewan watched impassively from the shadows.

"Methinks the lad is a wee bit daft," someone muttered.

The youth gave an almost girlish giggle. "Aye, 'tis what my wee sisters tell me they want in a lad," he said, slurring his words somewhat in his haste. "'Tis what I pray I'll become one day to hold the lass of my dreams." He scanned the room before him as a look of shocked outrage belatedly suffused his face. "Ach, now, ye dinna think I was speaking for*myself*, did ye?"

Most of the men appeared downright confused at this admission. A few of them were ill at ease, and Alec's piercing green eyes narrowed into speculative slits.

"But we asked ye what *ye* want, lad," someone grunted. "Not what ye think a lass wants, aye?"

"Aye, who can fathom what the lasses want. They're peculiar creatures, they are," another remarked.

As the talk turned then to the mysteries of the female mind, Moridac withdrew from the conversation, settled back against the wall, and nervously nibbled at his nails.

Ewan frowned and folded his arms. He found the lad's presence troublesome, and settling back himself, he regarded the lad from under hooded lashes.

Since the moment he'd met him, he'd thought the lad would make a better lass. He was far too slender, too graceful, and his skin too soft. But, Sweet Mary, this evening, in the dim light of the burning embers, he didn't look like a lad at all! The curve of the lad's throat was downright womanly!

And his eyes were unusually expressive. Deep, liquid, brown eyes that seemed to read his soul.

Ewan dropped his gaze to the soft wreath of black curls framing the youth's face. A particularly large curl lay against the nape of his neck, a neck with an unusually seductive curve.

With his frown deepening, Ewan shook his head in an attempt to clear it.

Tricks of the firelight, that's what it was, nothing more.

And then the lad bit his lip. They were full, rosy lips.

Rubbing his suddenly aching forehead, Ewan made his mind up all at once. The lad had to go. At once. Before he lost all sense of reason.

At first, he'd promised to escort the youth to Stirling. But after his first confusing encounters, he'd shortened it to the Scottish

Border. But even that seemed too far now. He much preferred to be rid of the lad sooner.

Mayhap one of the men had procured coin enough to pay the youth and send him on his way at morningtide. ‘Twas a bit callous but most likely safer for the youth in the end. After all, the patrols weren’t searching for a lone lad.

And none could deny that the battlefield was too grim a place for such a gentle soul.

A hand fell on Ewan’s shoulder and he glanced up, surprised to find Alec stooping over him.

“And ye?” the man asked with a teasing grin. “What do ye wish for in a lass, Ewan?”

Ewan raised a brow, surprised the conversation had gone a full circle, but even more astonished that Alec would ask him that particular question. The man knew the answer right well.

Dropping his gaze to Alec’s hand still resting on his shoulder, he muttered thickly, “Move your hand, lest ye lose it.”

Alec merely squeezed his fingers tighter in an obvious gesture of comfort. Then lowering his voice, he murmured, “Iona is not a fitting match for ye, Ewan, even though she be my kin. Ye deserve true love. Aye, mayhap fate has a say—”

“Love is pointless. ‘Tis a dream, nothing more,” Ewan answered flatly.

“Nay, I—” Alec began earnestly.

“Enough!” Ewan grimly cut him short. And rising to his feet, he quitted the smoke-filled hovel and headed out into the darkness.

Taking the rough stone path leading into the forest, he leaned against the trunk of a tree, and snapping a twig off a thick branch, idly began plucking the leaves. He didn’t think for a time. He merely stared out unseeing into the darkness, listening only to the soft pit-pat of the rain on the leaves overhead.

And then his lips formed a name. Iona. Iona Hepburn.

He hadn’t thought of her in months.

Having grown weary of his son’s lack of progress in wedding to produce an heir, the Earl of Mull had taken matters into his own hands the year before. He had promised Ewan’s hand to Iona Hepburn, cousin to both Alec as well as Archibald Douglas, the Earl of Angus and Lord Warden of the Eastern March. Ewan had met her on occasion, and for the most part, struggled to recall anything about her except a vague memory of a fiery temper and red hair to match.

Much to his father’s consternation, he hadn’t explicitly agreed to the betrothal.

But he hadn’t objected either.

And as time passed, both families had begun to plan the wedding,

assuming his silence meant tacit approval. He himself wasn't sure. He had felt nothing about the entire matter.

But then, he rarely felt anything anymore. The truth was that he'd lost interest in women altogether of late.

Clenching his jaw, he tossed the stripped twig aside.

Aye, and that was why his fascination with the lad was so bothersome.

Determined to see his plan through, he headed back to the cottage. The lad would be sent packing in the morning and that would be the end of it.

Stepping inside, he returned to his spot next to the fire.

The conversation had turned to the topic of hunting, and Alec sat on the three-legged stool, relating the tale of Moridac's slaying of the boar, though in a much more embellished form.

"Aye, and right skilled he was," Alec repeated, helping himself to a swig of ale.

"If only it were true." Moridac laughed along with the rest as he passed around a small leather bag filled with oatcakes.

"Aye, 'tis true!" Alec insisted and then turned to enlist Ewan's support. "Speak the truth, Ewan. The lad is no unskillful archer, is he?"

Ewan drew his brows together. "Aye, Moridac is beyond skilled as an archer, I'll grant him that," he agreed, eyeing the slim, dark-haired youth now playing a rowdy game of dice in the corner with several of the men. "And his heart is as brave and valiant as any. But we are at war. There's no place for a lad to ride amongst us."

His serious turn of the conversation caught the attention of all.

"Ach, Ewan!" Alec protested mildly around a mouthful of oatcake. "I'd wager my finest dirk that he's old enough." Tipping his stool back on two legs, he raised his voice. "Moridac, lad, how many summers do ye have under your belt?"

Across the room, Moridac craned his neck in their direction. "And why do ye care to know?" he challenged, his lively dark eyes brightening with interest.

"Why canna ye answer a simple question?" Alec retorted, slamming his stool back down on all three legs. "'Tis always a challenge with ye!"

"Ye've the patience of a nit, Alec!" Moridac answered playfully.

As their banter continued, Ewan crossed his arms and observed the raven-haired lad once again from beneath furrowed brows.

But then Moridac's dark eyes met his, gleaming with amusement, and Ewan glanced away. There it was again. The odd effect the lad had upon him.

Abruptly, the lad threw in his hand at the dice. "I'm off," he

announced. “’Tis time I saw to Diabhul.”

It was with some measure of relief that Ewan watched him go.

“He’s old enough—” Alec began as soon as he’d gone.

But Ewan cut him short. “The lad leaves on the morrow.”

Several of the men gasped.

“Ach, but ye’ve grown downright disagreeable of late, Ewan.” Alec’s tawny brows knit into a line. “If ‘tweren’t for Moridac, we’d be feeding the crows now, and well ye know it!”

“I’ll brook no argument. Give the lad coin and send him on his way,” Ewan ordered, a little surprised himself at the harshness in his tone.

At that, Alec rose abruptly to his feet, knocking the stool to the floor. “Nay! Not after what he’s done for us,” he said hotly. “Tell him yourself.”

All eyes followed him as he stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

There was a stilted silence, one in which Ewan crossed his arms and slowly walked to his makeshift bed of piled cloak and plaid. Keenly aware of the disapproving glares of his men, he turned to his own thoughts and settled in for another long, sleepless night.

After a time, both Moridac and Alec returned, and as they too rolled into their cloaks and plaids, snores gradually replaced all other sounds.

Once again, sleep eluded Ewan.

He sighed, knowing it would be another night of scant rest.

The rain battered the windows as he laid his head upon his arms and listened to the steady breathing of his men. Gradually, the storm outside passed, and the fire burned down on the hearth, leaving nothing but silence to mock him.

Several times, he eyed the lad’s sleeping face. He looked so young and peaceful with his raven hair gleaming in the soft firelight.

Expelling a breath of annoyance, Ewan tiredly rubbed a hand across the back of his neck, and allowing weariness to claim him, closed his burning eyes.

But sleep only came in fits and starts, and the night passed with interminable slowness. And it was with his customary relief that he saw the dawn break.

At a soft rustle of cloth, he closed his eyes and from under his lashes, watched Moridac rise. Tiptoeing over the sleeping men, the lad slipped outside.

With a grim scowl, Ewan made up his mind.

He’d tell the lad now.

Drawing his cloak around him, he stepped out into the cold morning air. Mud squelched beneath his feet as he shaded his eyes

and scanned the area.

There was no sign of the lad.

A bitter gust of wind lifted the hem of his cloak. The thin sunshine would do little to warm the day. In the distance, clouds gathered on the horizon, heralding more rain. It would be a miserable ride.

Moving swiftly, he set off once again down the narrow path toward the forest. For a time, he walked alongside a murmuring brook, and he had just made up his mind to turn back when he spied Moridac through a gap in the ancient, gnarled trees.

The lad was kneeling by the water, his cloak and his tunic had fallen from his shoulders, and he appeared to be concentrating upon unwinding a bandage wrapped around his chest.

Ewan paused.

Was the lad injured?

Concerned, he stepped through the underbrush just as the bandage fell away. It took Ewan a moment to recognize what he was seeing.

The soft swell of a breast. The gentle curve of a hip.

And then his jaw dropped open.

There was no doubt. This was no lad. Moridac was a woman!

Relief coursed through him, a relief so profound that he nearly chuckled outright.

And then the twig he was standing on snapped.

At the sound, Moridac whirled, tripping over the exposed roots of an ancient oak to sprawl headlong into the damp earth.

With a strangely light heart, Ewan all but laughed. “Aye, now, lass. ’Tis no cause for alarm.”

Rolling over, she sprang to her feet and gathered her cloak close about her. “Stand back, Ewan!” She glared.

The cloak slipped a little, exposing her bare shoulder, and all at once his blood ran hot. ‘Twas startling. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d allowed himself lusty thoughts over a lass.

He did smile then. For the first time in months.

Aye, he’d seen she was a lass from the start. He just hadn’t trusted his heart. And she was downright bonny. From her willowy height, short-cropped curls, to the perpetual mischievous gleam in her brown eyes.

And then she scowled. And that simple knotting of the brows effectively doused any impulse he might have had to follow his heart.

In that instant, he knew exactly who she was. Sweet Mary, but she’d changed since he’d helped to rescue her as a lassie from her cruel and aged husband!

His heart sank.

How could he even dare to think one lusty thought over Ruan

MacLeod's wee sister? Aye, he'd almost prefer that Moridac be a lad.

Half-choking, the name tore from his lips: "Merry MacLeod!" He reeled back with his head spinning in disbelief. "What are ye doing here?"

She was clearly surprised he knew her but recovered quickly. "How could I not come?" she challenged him in turn. And then a smile pulled her mouth, and dark, sooty lashes framed eyes dancing with mirth. "Did ye believe I was truly a lad?" she asked in a conspiratorial voice.

He just stared, unable to wrest his gaze away. It was hard to believe that she was the wee lass he'd scaled the wall to rescue. The echoes of her screams still haunted his dreams, but there was no pain in her eyes now. They only sparkled with humor.

"I had ye fooled," she said with a grin, stepping closer to him.

Finding her a wee bit too close for comfort, he stepped back, bumping into the gnarled trunk of a tree as he replied, "I'd sensed the truth was lacking."

"Aye, I did err once or twice," she admitted, twisting her lip into a wry grimace, and then her expression sobered. "But I had to come. I owed ye a life debt, Ewan. I couldna live with myself it ye were to die imprisoned."

She stepped up to him and cupped his cheek in the palm of her hand.

It was an unexpectedly tender gesture, and one that he instinctively knew could undo him. He wanted to back away, but there was nowhere left to go. Pressing his back further against the tree, he grasped her wrist and gently pushed her hand away.

"And Ruan?" he asked, seeking a distraction from her nearness. "Does he know ye came?"

Her brown eyes sparkled at that, causing his heart to stir. "Do ye think he'd have let me come?" she asked, clearly amused.

Ewan clenched his jaw and made up his mind at once. "Then I'll see ye safely escorted to Skye afore I ride to Stirling," he said. "We must ride fast, and ye canna let my men know you're a lass."

Merry's brow lifted curiously. "Are ye afraid they'd pester me with unwanted attention?" she asked.

He glanced down, realizing he was still holding onto her wrist. Releasing it abruptly, he replied, "Nay, but there are those among them with loose lips. I willna have word spread that Ruan's sister traveled unescorted and as a lad."

She gave a short bark of a laugh. "Are ye so protective of my reputation, then?"

The scent of her hair teased his nostrils, and he would have stepped back more if he could. Unwilling to acknowledge the heat

rising in his blood, he feigned an air of nonchalance and crossed his arms.

"You're like a sister to me, Merry MacLeod," he said, knowing that nothing could be further from the truth.

An impish grin formed on her lips, and with a daring glint in her gaze, she whispered, "But you're no brother to me, Ewan MacLean."

Reaching over, she touched his hand lightly with a single finger.

He closed his eyes, allowing himself only a moment to savor the sensation of her fingertips leaving a trail of warmth on his skin.

And then he quickly retracted his hand.

Aye, the lass threatened to stir his senses to life. But he couldn't allow it. Not Merry. 'Twould be a betrayal, though exactly of what kind he was unsure. It simply felt like one.

"I'll see ye safe to Skye," he repeated abruptly.

But she had only moved closer and, placing a hand on either side of his face, stood on her tiptoes to brush a soft kiss across his lips. Her lips were sweet, warm, as they lingered upon his. And it was a gentle kiss, filled with a tenderness he could almost touch.

And just as he knew it would, his blood responded in an undeniable surge of lust.

"Sweet Mary," he swore, nearly toppling her over as he twisted away with a growl.

He turned on her then, expecting to see her face rife with anger and rejection. But her brown eyes only sparkled with mischief.

"I canna promise it won't happen again, Ewan MacLean," she said lightly. And then waving her hand at him, she ordered, "Now, turn away then, aye? If ye want me to play the part of a lad still, I've a wee bit of preparation to be done."

Swallowing hard, he turned his back upon her, and slowly his sense of calmness returned.

He'd not let the lass weave her way into his heart.

Not Merry MacLeod.

A few moments later she was skipping up next to him and lacing her fingers through his. "I'm ready now," she announced.

He looked down at her, wondering how he could have ever thought her a lad. His eyes dropped to the rain-drenched curl on the nape of her neck, and a wave of pleasurable attraction washed over him.

Annoyed at his lack of control, he extricated his fingers from hers. "Ruan will have my head if I dinna see ye safely returned to Skye!" he exclaimed.

"He just might have your head, anyhow," she answered pertly.

He glanced at her and saw a flash of white teeth, and it took him a moment to realize that she was laughing at him.

Rattled, he spun on his heel and headed back down the path, struggling to push all thoughts of Merry aside.

A gray haze of smoke hung lazily over the cottage upon their return, and the scent of roasted meat permeated the air.

Stepping inside, Ewan saw that one of the scouts had returned, apparently bringing with him a bag of clothing and another small boar now roasting merrily on the spit.

"I've brought a few breeches and shirts," the man was saying. "They're looking for any man who wears the plaid."

As Alec reached for the bag the scout laughed.

"I couldna find breeches large enough for ye, lad, nor Ewan either," the man said.

"Tidings then?" Ewan asked, greeting the man with a quick nod.

"The roads are crawling with patrols," the scout replied and cast a dry look at Alec. "Did ye have to anger the Lord Warden so? Ye've made our lives fair difficult."

From the corner of his eye, Ewan saw Merry kneel next to Alec still sifting through the clothing. "And what did ye do to set the Lord Warden into such a fine fettle?" she asked.

Alec flashed a wide grin as the other men groaned.

Merry snorted. "I'd wager more than the lot of ye have fingers to count on that 'twas over a woman."

"I didna know she was his daughter," Alec offered sheepishly.

Merry rolled her eyes.

Jests began as the men began trying on the clothing, and in the end, only four were clad as proper Englishmen.

"I almost forgot. Coin for ye, Ewan," the scout said suddenly, tossing a small leather pouch to Ewan. "From a drunken tax-collector. I dinna think ye'd mind. But we'll need more English trappings, there's not a road out of here that isn't fraught with risk for those donned in plaid."

Ewan rubbed the stubble on his jaw. "Then let us break into parties of three. I'll journey with Alec and Moridac north to the Isles, afore rejoining the lot of ye in Stirling."

The men paused and Alec raised a curious brow. "The Isles? With the lad?"

"Aye," Ewan met his inquisitive gaze squarely. "'Tis a matter of honor to see the lad safe, and I'll see ye to your father's hall on the way."

"'Tis glad I am that ye've come to your right mind over the matter of the lad," Alec said cheerfully, rising to punch him on the shoulder. And then his expression sobered. "But I'll not be returning to my father's hall."

They matched stares for a time, and then Ewan frowned, glancing

about.

“And where’s the lad now?” he asked, noticing Merry had somehow contrived to leave the cottage without him seeing.

His question was answered a moment later by the clatter of hooves and a flash of black through the slats of the shutters. Throwing the door wide open, he was rewarded with a brief flash of Diabhul’s rump and tail disappearing around the bend in the road.

“And where is she off to?” Ewan accosted a man who’d been tasked to guard outside.

The man frowned, bewildered. “She?”

Ewan scowled. “The lad! Where’s the lad headed?”

“Ah!” The man’s eyes lit with understanding. “He’s off to get ye some clothing. Said he was the best one for the task, since the English aren’t looking for a lad—”

“God’s Wounds!” Ewan thundered, shoving past the man. “You’re a daft fool to believe it.”

“I’m coming with ye,” Alec said from behind.

“And I.” Lothar stood up.

“Then we’ll be meeting the rest of ye in Stirling ere the new moon,” Ewan said grimly. And then turning to Alec and Lothar, he added, “Let’s catch the lad afore the English do, aye?”

Chapter Five – Tell Me Your Name

Letting Diabhul run at his own pace, Merry enjoyed the heady feeling of speed as they galloped out of the forest and onto the road. The scout had told her a bustling town lay several leagues to the east. She had no doubt she would find English garb there for Ewan and the rest of his men. And though she had no coin, she was certain there would be arrogant, rich merchants aplenty who would supply breeches and shirts—albeit unbeknownst to themselves.

She'd been on the road only a few short minutes when she spied an English patrol, but it was of no concern. They weren't looking for a lone lad, and even if they were, there wasn't a horse that could match Diabhul's speed. She could easily outrun them.

She'd just drawn abreast of the soldiers when the leather-skinned leader of the patrol lifted his lance and hailed her.

"Halt!" he cried, his voice a thundering growl.

Merry hesitated but deciding she was in no immediate danger, pulled Diabhul's reins in and came to a stop a short distance away.

"Your name?" the man queried curtly, brushing his dark hair out of his eyes.

"Will," Merry said the first name that popped into her head. "Will, sir."

With his cold eyes sweeping Merry up and down, he spurred his horse forward. "And have you stolen your master's horse, Will?" he asked, as the three men behind him urged their mounts to follow suit.

She knew then that she had made a mistake. These men were clearly not inclined to listen, and so she didn't hesitate. Wheeling Diabhul's head, she crouched low over his neck, and with her clan cry of *Cùm gréim!*—Hold fast!—she dug her heels into his side.

The men cursed as the great horse sprang away.

Hearing the urgency in her voice, Diabhul stretched his legs and ran as if the very hounds of hell were upon him. The fine steed flew down the road as if he had wings, and when they'd covered almost a league, Merry finally threw a glance over her shoulder to see the Englishmen had abandoned their pursuit. Expelling a breath of relief, she willed her hammering heart to quieten, and easing the reins, slowed her horse to a canter.

She'd been more frightened than she cared to admit.

'Twas a fortunate thing Ewan hadn't witnessed her narrow escape.

Aye, and Ruan. She winced at the thought of the wrath she faced upon meeting her brother once again.

But there was no use fretting about it.

Deliberately forcing her thoughts to the matter at hand, she kept

an eye out for more patrols and cautiously continued on toward the town.

Through the gaps in the trees ahead, she finally glimpsed the sought-for village nestled on the crown of a hill. Guiding Diabhul down the rutted dirt lane, she came upon a quaint cottage with a privy shed built against the rear wall.

She cautiously approached.

The cottage appeared empty. Most likely, the inhabitants were working in the fields or had gone to market. Flinging a leg over the neck of her horse, she slid down and peered into the window.

The room was bare, save for a rough-hewn table flanked by two wooden benches.

Thinking to find something she could borrow to disguise herself—in case the English soldiers be near—she lifted the latch and stepped inside.

There was nothing useful in the first room, but ducking into the adjoining chamber, she saw a narrow cot and a willow basket—but beside them, most interestingly, a rusty-hinged trunk. Hurriedly, she knelt before the trunk and raising the heavy, creaking lid, pulled out a pair of threadbare trousers patched at the knee. Setting them aside in disappointment, she lifted a length of rough homespun cloth that proved to be a coarse but serviceable woolen kirtle, and within it was wrapped a linen chemise.

She smiled, pleased. They would do. And she'd be quick to try to return the clothing, hopefully before its owner ever found it missing.

Slipping out of her shirt and breeches, she unbound her breasts and changed swiftly. The kirtle was a wee bit too snug about the waist and low enough to reveal the soft swell of her breasts. Grimacing, she saw that it was several inches too short as well.

The townsfolk would think her a brazen lass, but there was naught she could do.

Tucking her raven curls into a white kerchief, she grabbed her discarded clothing and, helping herself to an empty burlap sack, slipped outside.

Eyeing a rain barrel by the privy shed, she ran over to quickly inspect her reflection in the water's surface.

Aye, she looked like a proper lass once again.

With a nod of satisfaction, she mounted Diabhul, and this time mindful of the English soldiers, galloped swiftly toward the town, heart racing.

Diabhul closed the distance quickly, and only a short time later, she drew rein near the thickest part of the forest at the edge of the village. Guiding her horse far enough to where he wouldn't be easily found, she tied him loosely to a tree next to a patch of natural forage.

“Feast well, Diabhul,” she murmured, giving his broad flat forehead a sound kiss. “I’ll return afore ye’ve had your fill.”

Straightening her kirtle, she retraced her steps through the underbrush and made her way into the bustling town.

The sound of a blacksmith's hammer rang through the streets as she entered the main gate, and it mingled with the cries of vendors hawking all sorts of food and wares, from baskets of fish to the nets to catch them. From atop the hill, the church bells tolled within their lofty tower.

It was market day and a busy one at that.

Ignoring the men’s whistles and the disapproving glances from respectable matrons, Merry picked her way across the muddy streets to the market square. But to her disappointment, it was harder to find suitable clothing than she’d thought.

Ewan and Alec were not short men, as apparently all Englishmen were.

With a growing frustration, she continued her search as a company of English soldiers marched through the square. But as they pushed their way through the crowd, she was struck by a sudden thought. Keeping her distance, she followed them to their guardhouse.

Several men lounged at the entrance, and upon seeing her stroll by, nodded appreciatively. But when their sight of her was finally obstructed, she quickly darted to the back of the building thinking to find a way to sneak inside.

Stepping cautiously into the yard behind, it took her a moment to register what she was seeing.

Clothing.

Spread out upon the grass to dry in the late spring sun were breeches and shirts of all sizes—but mostly importantly, ones to fit the tallest of English warriors.

She almost laughed out loud, so amazed she was that she’d stumbled upon a washing day! And without even stopping to question her luck, she hurried forward to stuff her burlap bag with a frenzied haste.

It didn’t take long, and she’d just hefted the heavy bag over her shoulder when she heard the sound of boots scraping against the cobblestones.

“There's no turning back now, Merry,” she whispered to herself and, drawing a deep breath, spun around to boldly face the newcomer.

It was a soldier, a young man with pock-marked skin, a firm chin, and a bent nose. He came to an abrupt halt, startled to see her standing there.

“Good day, kind sir,” Merry said, adopting her best English accent.

“I’ve come from the countryside to sell my wares at the market, but I’ve lost my way.”

It was a flimsy excuse. There probably wasn’t a fool that walked the Earth who could fail to find the market in the very center of the town. Clearing her throat, she proceeded to flutter her lashes and leaned down a little to distract the man a wee bit with a fine view of her bosom.

It worked stunningly well.

He didn’t even notice the clothing missing from the yard.

“Allow me to set you on your way, fair maiden,” he offered with a gallant bow and held out his arm.

With a giggle, she looped her arm through his. Realizing she was taller than he by at least half a head, she quickly stooped her shoulders. “You’re such a gentleman,” she cooed with another wide smile, intent on keeping his gaze focused away from the missing clothing.

She needn’t have worried.

Puffing his chest a little, he sought only her attention as he grandly guided her to the front of the guardhouse and down the lane. He then asked, “And where have you come from, fair maid?”

She hadn’t a clue what any of the nearby villages were named. “Oh, the countryside,” she answered vaguely, and seeking to distract him, asked quickly, “There were many soldiers on the road. Would you know why?”

“Yes,” he said with an important nod. “The roads are dangerous right now, my dear. Several notorious outlaws have escaped Carlisle Castle. Dangerous men. Scots.” He flared his nostrils in distaste.

“Scots?” she repeated, assuming an expression of solemn astonishment.

“You must stay off the roads,” he advised, patting her hand looped through his arm. “At least for a few days. No doubt, the wretches will be caught soon.”

“With so many soldiers on the roads, I’m certain they will,” she remarked lightly, gracing him with another bright smile.

“There you are, my child.” A man’s voice broke into their conversation.

Merry froze.

It was Alec.

Clad in a cowled monk’s robe, he stood on the side of the street with his hands planted on his hips, his emerald eyes twinkling, but the rest of his handsome face wiped of all expression.

Merry swallowed.

And then Alec swept forward to bless the soldier with the sign of the cross. “*Benedicte, my son,”* he murmured in a deep tone as he

lifted the heavy sack from Merry's shoulders. "Make haste, my daughter. The others are waiting. We must not let the little ones suffer."

The soldier's brows knit in confusion.

Bobbing a curtsey, Merry found her voice. "I thank you, kind sir," she said to him. "I trust I've been no trouble. Perhaps I could find ye … *you* when the market closes, at the market cross … to chat with ye more?" She bit her lip, annoyed she'd slipped into a Scots accent in her haste.

He didn't appear to even notice.

"I shall be there, fair maid," he promised. And with a courtly bow for her and a respectful one for Alec, he pivoted on his heel and marched back toward the guardhouse.

And then hard fingers closed upon Merry's arm, and she nearly tripped as Alec pulled her down a narrow alley.

"Ye canna drag me like a sack of turnips, Alec!" she protested, wrenching her arm free.

But he caught her about the waist and half-carried her off the street and then into a small stone house with a thatch roof. It was some kind of storeroom, bundles of dried herbs hung from the rafters, and the thick smell of aged roots hung in the air.

But fortunately, the room was vacant.

As he closed the door, she waited until the scrape of the latch slid into place before expelling a breath of relief. But consternation immediately followed as Alec grabbed her chin and forced her to look into his penetrating, green eyes.

"A sly vixen is what ye are, lass," he said with his brows creased into a frown. "Does Ewan know you're not a lad?"

Merry hesitated. Ewan had bade her to tell no one. She wasn't inclined to ignore him. "Ye must keep this secret for me, Alec," she answered instead. "Swear upon your honor as a highlander that ye won't tell."

He tilted his head, allowing his eyes to rove over her with an obvious flicker of interest. "How many secrets do ye have, lass?" he asked. "Who are ye?"

Merry scowled. "Swear ye won't tell, on your soul!" she demanded.

Again, he let his green eyes sweep her from head to toe, lingering longer than necessary upon her breasts before he cocked his head toward the door and replied, "Aye, I'll keep your secret. Ye saved my life. 'Tis the least I can do, but ye'd best change, and right quickly! Ewan and Lothar will be here any moment. We've been searching for ye all over."

She didn't need to be told twice.

Grabbing the burlap sack out of his grasp, she upended it and, sifting through the pile, quickly found her clothing and the bandages to bind her breasts.

"Step outside now, Alec," she ordered with a glare.

He stood there a moment, observing her with a smile just a wee bit too knowing before tugging his cowled hood over his head. Sauntering to the door, he then stepped outside.

Merry furrowed her brows. The man knew her secret now, but there was naught she could do about it. She heaved a sigh. What was done, was done. Quickly, she changed, and she'd just tied the last lace on her shirt when the door sprang back on its hinges, banging against the wall.

Ewan stalked into the room with Alec and Lothar at his heels.

"'Twas a right foolishly absurd thing to do!" Ewan thundered, his eyes flashing with raw emotion. "The English could have caught ye, or even worse, left ye dead on the road!"

Merry drew herself to her full height. "I was in no danger," she said, locking her jaw. "They're not looking for me."

He threw back the hood of his mud-spattered cloak and stood there, angry, solid, his shrewd blue eyes locking onto hers. The English soldier had been right to warn her of the escapees. There was no doubt that Ewan was a dangerous, battle-hardened man.

"There were many eyes who saw ye ride through Carlisle's gates," he objected through clenched teeth. "And if even not, there would be plenty who would stop ye on the road, thinking ye stole your master's horse."

"Diabhul can outrun any of them," she retorted, but swallowed. She couldn't tell him just how exactly true his words were. Instead, she stooped and picked up an armful of clothing, and eyeing Ewan's plaid peeking out from under his cloak, said, "Ye'd best change. They're looking for Scots."

"'Tis better than a monk's robe," Alec said, stepping forward with a supportive nod.

As he and Lothar ruffled through the pile, Ewan stayed where he was, arms crossed and jaw clenched.

And then Lothar began shrugging out of his shirt, and Merry hastily retreated to the window under the pretense of standing guard.

"I'll stand watch," she volunteered.

The men changed quickly, and then Alec commented, "Few will stop us now, dressed so daintily as English soldiers, aye?"

"'Tis a brilliant idea, lad," Lothar grunted in approval.

Half-turning, Merry cast a furtive glance from the side of her lashes, and satisfied they were fully dressed, turned to face them.

The three of them made splendid English soldiers. Especially

Ewan. The way his tunic stretched tight across his wide shoulders drew attention to his hard, masculine chest.

The beat of her heart picked up in rhythm, but it didn't last long. Catching the stern line of his brow, she glanced away, feeling her anger return.

"Hie ye off to the horses, the both of ye," Ewan commanded the men. "I'll aid Moridac in retrieving his horse and join ye by the river within the hour."

Alec paused.

"And what would ye say, Alec?" Ewan asked, noting the man's reluctance.

The highlander waited a moment longer, but then expelling a breath, shook his head, and along with Lothar bundled out of the door.

As soon as they'd left, Ewan rounded on her. "Are ye mad?" he asked.

"Mad?" Merry repeated. Anger reflected in her dark brown eyes. "I came to find *ye* something to wear so you wouldn't be caught dead in your plaid!"

"Ye could have been killed," he retorted, his words clipped.

She scowled at him, and then her eyes fell, noting his shirt was still open at the neck. His throat and collarbone were distracting. Glancing away again, she grumbled, "Ye seem to have difficulty in thanking me."

"*Thanking* ye?" he repeated through clenched teeth.

She stiffened. "Aye, ye should thank me for saving ye, and for riding to find safe clothing—"

"Ye've shown naught but a lack of foresight this entire time," he interrupted tersely.

At that, her anger erupted anew. Throwing her shoulders back, she planted her hands on her hips. "I used to hold ye in the highest esteem, Ewan MacLean, but I see now that you're an ungrateful wretch!"

"Am I?" he grated. "Do ye have nary a care in the world then? What would Ruan say of ye?"

With her brown eyes flashing passionately, she retorted, "I may be a lass, but I'm not helpless. Ruan taught me to ride and shoot an arrow, ye daft oaf. And I've been practicing with him for years to learn to wield a dirk properly. He saw to it that I'd never have to wait to be rescued from the clutches of a cruel man again!"

At her allusion to the past, Ewan went still.

They stood there, breathing heavily.

And then turning on his heel, Ewan approached the door, pausing with his hand poised over the latch. "Let us quit this place afore we

are caught," he said, but his voice had softened.

It wasn't an apology but more an unspoken peace offering, and with her anger melting, she stepped out behind him into the afternoon sun.

They'd scarcely left the alleyway when Ewan suddenly stepped sideways. And curling an arm about her waist, he whirled her back. She fell against him, her soft breasts colliding with his chest, as he pushed her around the corner of a low stone building and back against the wall.

"Hssst," his hot breath brushed her cheek as he whispered. "Dinna move."

She froze.

Voices advanced, the voices of English soldiers, and it seemed an eternity before they'd passed.

Merry held still with her hands upon Ewan's chest, and then all at once, she was conscious only of the awareness growing between them.

He seemed to feel it too. For a moment, his fingers lifted as if to touch her face, but apparently thinking better of it, he let his hand fall to his side instead.

She felt a small wave of disappointment.

But then his gaze locked upon hers and she felt herself drown in the intensity of his blue eyes, an intensity that made her shiver.

It would be so natural to reach up and to kiss him. Already, her lips were only a hair's breadth away from his. She could feel the warmth of his breath on her mouth. Silently, she begged his lips to cover hers, her heart rioting at his nearness. Aye, she wanted to kiss him. And she wanted to touch him, every part of him, from his head to his toes.

He shifted then, and with his lips dangerously close to her own, he whispered, "We should be going now."

His voice was low, sending desire rippling through her.

She didn't move.

And neither did he.

The silence between them lengthened.

And then slowly, he lowered his head and pressed his lips against her forehead in a chaste kiss, not the hot passionate devouring of the lips she'd wished for.

He stepped back then, and taking her wrist, returned to the street.

She blew her bangs out of her face, catching her breath in her disappointment.

Neither spoke as they left the town, and after each had retrieved their horse, they made their way to the agreed upon meeting place.

Alec and Lothar were there, waiting by the river with a sack of provisions. And with little more than a brief exchange of greetings and

an explanation to Merry that they'd broken into smaller parties to evade the soldiers, they urged their horses north toward Scotland.

Merry followed, depressed.

She hadn't returned the kirtle as she'd planned. It hadn't been her intention to steal from an innocent soul. And she'd revealed her secret to Alec. Aye, she'd also essentially lied to Ewan—or had avoided telling him about her encounter with the English soldiers, anyway. And he hadn't kissed her as she'd wished.

Aye, nothing ever went according to plan.

With darkening thoughts, she trotted behind the others, growing grumpier with each step north.

The going was difficult. The roads were muddy from the recent rain, slowing their progress. Tall sloping trees clothed each side of the road, dipping and swaying gently in the wind for mile upon mile. But fortunately, they met no one on the road, and as the sun sank on the horizon, they found a grove of rowan trees clustered closely, forming a natural shelter.

After seeing Diabhul tended, Merry joined the others by the small fire.

"Eat, lad," Alec ordered, tossing her a hard loaf of barley bread and a dried fish.

"Thank ye," she murmured, tossing her saddle down and sitting upon it.

He only responded with a grunt.

For a time, no one spoke, and the crackle of the fire and the occasional call of an owl were the only sounds to be heard.

Tearing off a large bite of bread, Merry chewed in silence and gradually became aware that she was staring at Ewan from under her lashes.

He looked tired as he sat kneading his shoulder and staring into the flames, his food untouched at his side. The outline of his toned shoulders and powerful thighs made her heart skip a beat before pulling with sympathy. He was clearly suffering. She wished she could wipe his pain away.

"And does Ewan have horns growing from his head, *lad*?" Alec's amused voice quipped.

Merry jerked, biting her lip in embarrassment as both Lothar and Ewan glanced up.

"Ye seem to be watching him with such a marked interest," Alec continued. "Mayhap even a bit dreamily—"

"Ach, now," Merry interrupted, leaning over to swat him on the knee. "I was but thinking. I didna pay any heed in which way I was looking, ye daft fool." She followed her words with a dark scowl of warning.

“There’s no need to take offense,” Alec replied with a careless shrug, but there was a roguish gleam in his eye. “Aye, I swear the lad's as sensitive as a lass at times.”

Merry’s eyes widened in alarm.

But he merely pretended to yawn. And then with an infectious grin, he asked, “Then what shall we *lads* speak of? How shall we wile away the time afore we sleep?”

“Need we speak at all?” Ewan asked with a sharp look of disapproval.

“And why not?” Alec challenged, crossing his booted feet at the ankles. “Shall we speak of what we lads love the most? Horses, lasses, and little else, aye?”

Baffled over the man’s intention, Merry furrowed her brows.

“I’ll agree to that,” Lothar spoke suddenly, startling them all. He scratched his blunt nose and said, “I say we ride to the nearest town where the whisky flows freely and a man can find a woman to trade her charms for—”

“Enough!” Ewan ordered crisply and Alec coughed in alarm as they both cast sidelong glances in Merry’s direction.

She hid a smile, amused at their protectiveness.

But the exchange was enough to silence Alec then, and they were each left to their own thoughts.

Clearing her mind, Merry watched the fire for a time before snuggling deeper into her woolen cloak. Lulled by the crackling of the fire and the soft rustle of the leaves overhead, she finally drifted off to sleep. She woke up once or twice in the dead of the night to see Ewan illuminated by the moonlight, still sitting by the dying fire, watchful and vigilant. It was at once comforting and sad to see. He seemed so cold, remote, and so very far away.

Dawn broke, and Merry opened her eyes with her stomach growling, voicing its dissatisfaction. But the scent of meat was heavy in the air. Someone had gone hunting as two plump pheasants roasted over the renewed fire.

Nearby, Ewan lounged against a tree, absent-mindedly running his strong hands through his flaxen hair.

Covertly, she watched him.

Why hadn’t he kissed her? She’d wanted him to. Surely, he must have known that. Had he refrained for lack of interest? Or, heaven forbid, did he have a lass waiting for him somewhere?

The thought soured her mood considerably.

“And a good morning to ye, lad,” Alec’s voice broke into her thoughts.

Frowning, she sat up to see him lazily wiping one of her own arrow shafts with a handful of grass.

“I used your bow,” he explained, nodding at the pheasants. “I didna think ye’d object to waking to a wee bit of fresh meat.”

“Aye,” she agreed, rising to her feet.

“’Tis a smallish bow,” he commented, stooping to pick it up and heft it in the air. “’Tis almost the same as my wee sister, Catrona’s.”

From the corner of her eye, Merry could see the outline of Ewan’s strong jaw as he tilted his head to listen.

Striding up to Alec, she twisted his ear. “I need a hand with Diabhul,” she muttered harshly and with a toss of her head.

He fell into step beside her with a grin.

“And what are ye up to?” she growled, once out of Ewan’s earshot. “I thought ye were a man of honor.”

Alec folded his arms and eyed her from head to toe. And then something entered his eyes—something Merry could not quite identify.

“I’ve not betrayed ye,” he said in a serious tone. “I dinna even know who ye truly are, lass. Tell me, what is your name? Where do ye come from?”

Merry blinked, taken aback by the switch of subject. “Ach, I canna trust ye, ye daft fool,” she snapped and inexplicably feeling shy, she waved her hand and stepped back. “I only ask that ye keep your word, aye? I’ll be going now. I’ve Diabhul—”

He caught her by the arm then. Gently. “Tell me—”, he began.

But then Ewan’s deep voice called them both, and seizing the excuse to leave, Merry twisted free and fairly ran back to camp.

Shortly after, they departed, heading north to Scotland once more.

And this time, Alec intruded upon Merry’s thoughts for a time. What was the man playing at?

She watched him curiously.

He was in a particularly cheerful mood, singing and whistling until Ewan barked for him to stop. He obliged. But it wasn’t long before he began to whistle under his breath again, gradually growing louder until Ewan finally threatened to gag him.

“We canna draw eyes toward us, Alec. Has your good sense left ye?” Ewan rebuked sharply, annoyance simmering in his blue eyes.

“It’s been too long since I’ve had any sense, I fear,” Alec replied with a smile and then turning toward Merry, sent her an all-too-knowing wink.

But then she was too distracted by Ewan to give him much more than a cursory glance. Aye, Ewan was a beautiful man. Powerful. Striking. He sat tall in the saddle, the lithe line of his thigh drawing her eye, and she couldn’t help but admire the wide set of his shoulders. Aye, authority sat well on them.

He must have felt her eyes upon him, for he turned to search her

face, but she quickly looked away.

He then ordered them all to quicken the pace. “If we ride hard, we might yet reach Scotland afore sundown. Let us make haste!”

They continued their journey, meeting no one on the road. And as the morning waned, clouds heavy with the threat of rain filled the horizon. By the afternoon, the high, gusty winds brought with them another rainstorm. And upon reaching the river, they discovered the foaming, swollen waters had washed away the bridge, rendering the crossing impassable.

Ewan retreated the group at once to the forest, and they dismounted under the eaves and watched the sheeting rain.

“And is there no other bridge?” Alec asked impatiently for the third time. His mood had darkened with the passing of the day.

Ewan threw him an exasperated glance. He’d already answered the question several times. “We’ll lose a day’s ride at least, but we have no choice. We’ll head east on the morrow,” he grunted, wiping the rain dribbling down his forehead with the back of his arm. “But we’ll travel no more this night. ‘Twould be too treacherous.”

Leading them to higher ground, Ewan pushed through the low-hanging branches, finally finding a suitable place to rest for the night.

Wet and cold, Merry dismounted, and in spite of the dampness surrounding them, Ewan started a fire as Lothar silently distributed the last chunks of stale barley bread and bits of dry cheese.

No one spoke for a time. They were cold, tired, and still somewhat hungry, but as the fire began to burn brighter, their spirits rose.

With a wordless question, Lothar pointed to Merry’s bow, and at her nod of permission, the quiet Frank picked up the weapon and disappeared into the gathering gloom.

“Let us pray he finds a deer,” Alec drawled, absently scratching the bridge of his aquiline nose. “I’d devour it all, and the king’s men wouldna even find a single hoof to hang us for the poaching of it.”

Merry smiled.

Even Ewan’s blue eyes crinkled around the corners in amusement.

And then Alec yawned and, catching Merry’s eye, said in a teasing tone, “I’ve been wondering, lad. Do ye shave every day? There’s not a whisker on ye.” He flashed a conspiratorial smile.

Merry scowled, irritated. “Nay,” she nearly growled. “It pains me deeply that I canna grow a beard.”

She cast a quick glance Ewan’s way, only to see his white teeth flash in what could have been a smile. But he turned away before she could be certain.

“Well, there’s no great pity, lad,” Alec continued unrepentantly. “The lasses prefer a man clean-shaven. ‘Tis less of a prickly kiss, I’ve been told.”

“Aye, ‘twould seem so,” Merry agreed as she watched Ewan somewhat distractedly. She had yet to see him truly smile. Or laugh.

“Then mayhap I should start shaving more regularly, aye?” Alec was saying. “There’s a lass I would wish to see me as a braw man. Aye, she has the bonniest brown eyes this side of the Forth.”

Ewan’s shoulders tensed at that.

“The Lord Warden’s daughter?” Merry teased with a yawn, grateful the conversation had steered away from herself.

“Nay,” Alec said in a light tone. “A much lovelier lass, to be sure. One who could melt a man’s heart, even if it were made of ice.”

The look came into his eyes then. The same look she’d seen before. And this time, she knew what it was.

Desire.

“Nay, feelings of love are best kept at bay,” Ewan’s deep voice rumbled. “There’s naught to be gained from rekindling those slumbering flames.”

Growing all at once uncomfortable, Merry sprang to her feet. “I saw wood sorrel not far away. ‘Twill sate our hunger until Lothar returns.”

“I’ll go with ye,” Alec volunteered. “We’re still in England. I’ll stand watch.”

Merry frowned but, shrugging her shoulders, tramped into the surrounding wood with her annoyance growing with each step. And when she was satisfied Ewan could no longer hear her, she whirled around to face Alec.

“I dinna care for the way ye keep secrets, Alec Montgomery,” she said, her brown eyes flashing, and then mimicking his voice, she added, *“Do ye shave? There’s not a whisker on ye!”*

He merely looked down at her with an easy smile fixed upon his lips. “Ach, there’s no harm done,” he protested. “But I’ll not anger ye. Tell me your name and I swear I’ll stop.”

She snorted. “I’ll hold ye to it,” she snapped. “Moridac. My name is Moridac.”

He rolled his eyes. “Your true name, ye wily lass,” he insisted.

“Make yourself useful, ye daft oaf,” she replied instead, kneeling to yank some wood sorrel growing in a cluster near a fallen tree.

“Aye, I’ve made my share of mistakes,” he said, his voice suddenly soft. “But I’ve lost interest in my scandalous ways.”

Merry laughed outright. “Aye? And for how long? A day?”

He didn’t share her laughter. Instead, he knelt beside her and, locking his gaze with hers, began pulling foliage from the ground. “What twist of fate brought ye here?”

She met his eyes steadily and then pointed to what he held. “Stay your hand, ye fool. ‘Tis vetch you’ve picked. Even your horse knows to

stay away from that!"

"Ach, they're both green," he replied with a lazy smile, and slowly, he reached over to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear.

She held still a moment.

But then, standing abruptly, she spun around, only to collide into a broad, solid chest.

Chapter Six – "Take My Hand"

Not really stopping to consider why, Ewan strode through the damp underbrush after Alec and Merry. He arrived just in time to hear Alec declare that he'd lost interest in his scandalous ways.

Ewan paused, intending to shamelessly eavesdrop when Alec reached over and brushed a bit of Merry's hair back from her face.

A response rippled through Ewan. A response he was unprepared for.

He swallowed. Hard. There was no denying it.

'Twas a hot wave of jealousy.

From the very start, Merry had stirred his blood, and it was only worsening with time. Her humor, her daring spirit, and her loving heart wove a stronger net around him by the day. He'd almost kissed her in the village. That still astonished him. He'd wanted to taste her lips again, slowly, in a soft lingering touch of sweet abandon. It had taken every ounce of his strength to install a brotherly peck upon her forehead instead.

He knew he was not the right man for her. Nay, Merry MacLeod—his dearest friend's wee sister—deserved an honorable light-hearted man to match her loving, high-spirited ways, not a battle-weary warrior with haunted dreams.

But then, she leapt to her feet, and whirling, ran straight into his chest.

He drew his breath in sharply as the scent of her hair filled his nostrils, and the mere softness of her clouded all other senses. Ignoring a stab of sweet longing to pull her close and simply cradle her in his arms, he willed his rioting emotions into submission.

Stepping back, he grated, "Ye shouldna stray so far from the fire. 'Tis unwise of ye both."

Merry stiffened momentarily at his tone, but then with a preoccupied smile, reached over and patted him on the arm—much in the manner one would pat a child on the head.

"Ye shouldna fret so, Ewan," she consoled, her brown eyes warm and vibrant. "Ye really should be resting, aye? Ye dinna sleep as ye should."

"Aye, there's no need for ye to be here," Alec muttered irritably, sending Ewan a questioning sidelong glance.

He was right. They both knew it. But Ewan wasn't about to admit it.

Folding his arms, he fixed Alec with a stern glare, expecting the man to yield and move as ordered. It usually worked. But this time, Alec didn't move, save to obstinately raise his chin instead.

“Dinna be ungrateful, Alec,” Merry chided him with a disapproving scowl. “Ewan’s ever on the alert, watching over us. Let us all return now, aye?”

However, Alec scarcely paid her heed. Rising to his feet, he crossed his arms and locked gazes with Ewan in an outright challenge.

It could only mean one thing.

As he’d suspected, Alec had somehow discovered Merry to be a lass. And *that* ‘twas downright disconcerting, to say the least. The rascal of a Montgomery had just landed them all in a dungeon for dallying with the Lord Warden’s daughter. He was hardly a man worthy of Merry MacLeod.

And then Ewan became aware of Merry shaking his arm. She was standing close. He could feel the warmth emanating from her skin, and a wave of protectiveness reared up within him.

“Have ye taken a blow to the head, Ewan?” she was asking, her brown eyes twinkling. “Let’s go, aye?”

“Aye,” he agreed, a wee bit rattled. Stepping back, he waved an inviting hand to Alec. It wasn’t really an invitation. Alec would know it for what it was—another command. “After ye, Montgomery.”

Montgomery. All of his men knew well he would only address them by their surnames when he was angry and expected immediate obedience.

Alec clenched his jaw. He stood there, his feet planted firmly on the ground. But as Merry then sent him an inquisitive glance, he suddenly complied. Looking as if he’d much rather do anything else, he stepped forward but paused the moment he drew abreast of Ewan.

“Nothing escapes ye, does it, *MacLean?*” he inquired in a voice laced with frustration. “I swear ye have the eyes of a hawk.”

Ewan’s jaw twitched, and then leaning close so only Alec could hear, he looked straight ahead and, barely moving his lips, hissed a warning. “Leave her be if ye have a whit of sense. No games, or I’ll have your head, I swear it.”

Alec cast him a look, at once wounded and angry, and then they went back to the camp in somber silence to await Lothar’s return.

As the light of day had almost been spent, the Frank returned with several plump rabbits, which were soon put to spit and roasted. The group remained silent until all had eaten and, succumbing to weariness, they fell asleep.

All except Ewan.

He sat, staring into the dying flames, lost in thought for a time, before lying back and folding an arm over his face, in the hopes a deep sleep would overtake him.

But as usual, his night was fitful and provided little rest.

* * *

The group rose at first light, and under a lead-hued sky, they headed east for a time. However, the recent rains had rendered the roads treacherous, and the going was even slower than before. The horses sunk into the mud past their fetlocks, their hooves making sucking sounds as they squelched through the muck.

By noon the sun had succeeded in piercing the haze to make their journey a bit more pleasant.

A short time afterwards, they came to a crossroads, and this time, chose the northerly road. But they'd gone less than a quarter of a league when Ewan's horse began to markedly favor a leg.

Dismounting, he knelt beside the gelding to see that its fetlock was hot and swollen.

Ewan frowned.

The horse would not be traveling much farther, that was certain.

"I feared so," Merry sighed, slipping down from Diabhul's back to join Ewan. She gave the gelding a sympathetic pat on the rump. "We've been riding too hard for ye, old lad, haven't we now?"

"There's a hamlet not far down the road. Mayhap we can trade him in for some provisions, aye?" Alec suggested, joining them to peer at the gelding's leg. "Aye, that's a hoof that willna be touching Scotland."

Grabbing a stick, he gave the horse a little poke.

Swearing, Ewan leapt out of the way, pushing Merry back as the gelding lashed out in response.

"Are ye daft, Alec?" Ewan growled.

"'Tis the only way to see how sore he is," Alec said with a shrug.

And then the sound of giggling caused them both to turn.

Merry was sprawled in the mud and muck. Chuckling, she floundered a bit, trying to rise. "'Tis a bog in the making here," she said, slipping and falling to her knees.

"Forgive me," Ewan said, reaching down with a scowl.

"There's naught to forgive," she answered. "Mud is better than a hoof to the head, aye?"

"Then allow me to aid ye," Alec inserted himself, knocking Ewan's hand away to extend his own. "'Tis my foolishness that landed ye there now."

Ewan arched his brow and sent Alec a cold stare. "The lad doesna need your help," he said.

"Though he needs yours?" Alec challenged with a flare of his nostrils.

Merry looked up at them a little surprised and rolling her eyes, slapped both of their hands away. "I can very well help myself, ye fools—"

But before she could finish her words, Ewan stooped, and placing

an arm about her waist, lifted her upright.

She blinked, surprised. And then removing her sodden cloak, she strode to Diabhul, past the silent Lothar sitting on his horse and observing them all with folded arms.

Alec's voice then hissed in Ewan's ear. "Do ye think I canna win a woman's heart?" he charged acidly.

Ewan clenched his jaw and met his eyes squarely. "I'm in no mood to quarrel, lad."

He took a step forward, but Alec blocked his way.

Raising a brow, Ewan lowered his voice in warning. "Step out of my way, Alec."

But Alec's green eyes narrowed, and he replied, "Aye, you're the only man I'd step aside for, MacLean. But ye'd best see matters at Hermitage Castle done with or I won't be standing aside for long, aye? Do ye understand?"

Ewan held still, stunned.

Not because Alec had just challenged him to resolve his engagement with Lady Iona of Hermitage Castle—that was simple enough. He knew now that he never had intended to wed the woman at all.

Nay. He was astonished because at that moment he realized he wasn't willing to allow Merry to give her hand, or her heart, to anyone, save himself. Shaken, he glanced over to where she stood next to Diabhul. Even covered in mud, there was no denying the lure of her.

Lifting her eyes to his, she brushed a strand of hair from her face, leaving a trail of mud across her cheek.

Oddly, his lips wanted to twitch into a smile.

"Are ye well, Ewan?" she asked, her brown eyes flooding with concern. "Ye look as pale as death, ye do."

He studied her face. Aye, he'd long considered himself dead, but this vibrant lass was perilously close to wakening him. Could he allow it?

Uncertain, he scowled and announced to them all, "We'll not be reaching Scotland afore nightfall. Alec's plan is a good one. In yon village, there will surely be a soul willing to trade provisions for this horse. There's life in him still, and with a good long rest he should be fair recovered."

"But ye?" Merry asked. "How will ye ride?"

Pivoting on his heel, he strode toward her, and he did smile this time. It felt strange to do it, but somehow natural in Merry's presence.

Her lips curved up in response to his, until he said, "I'll be riding Diabhul, of course."

She frowned, at once.

“Diabhul willna allow ye on his back,” she replied with a stubborn set to her mouth. Ruan was the only man he would let handle him.

Ewan arched a brow at the challenge. “I understand Diabhul well enough,” he said. “He may not be thrilled at the thought, but he’ll allow me to ride him.”

She wasn’t convinced. In fact, she suddenly seemed to find it amusing. “Then, brave sir, please mount your steed,” she invited with a courtly bow, holding out the reins.

He didn’t take them. Not at first.

Diabhul reminded him of his own favored battle-charger. Temperamental. Testy. And downright foul-behaved toward all save the handful he trusted.

The beast was exceedingly smart.

Nay, the horse would not trust him. Not this quickly. But he’d not let the steed control the situation like a spoiled princess. The thought made him smile yet again. And feeling strangely light-hearted, he seized the animal’s bridle and looked him straight in the eye.

“Aye, ye wee princess,” he informed Diabhul. “Ye’ll be doing as I say now, aye? You’re not the ruler here.”

Diabhul flattened his ears.

“I thank ye for the warning, my lady,” Ewan said, noting his response. “I’ll not use the stirrups.”

Grabbing the saddle, he waited for the horse to buck, and then just as it reared, swung himself onto the animal’s back.

It didn’t take long before Diabhul realized that Ewan could not be unseated. And with a loud angry snort, the horse submitted—at least for the moment.

Ewan knew the battle was far from over, and he had no doubt the crafty beast would urgently and most stealthily seek opportunities to be rid of him. But he enjoyed such challenges, and pleased to have reached at least a temporary truce, he wheeled Diabhul around to where Merry stood.

There was admiration in her eyes, and it warmed his soul.

“Well done,” Alec said tightly, and then taking up the reins of the gelding, headed toward his own mount without a backwards glance.

Ewan watched him go before turning back to Merry. “Ye’ll be riding with me then,” he announced and, swooping low in the saddle, caught her about the waist to swing her up before him.

Immediately, the fragrance of her hair assailed his senses. He closed his eyes, allowing himself a moment to enjoy it before pushing all such thoughts aside.

She was still Ruan’s wee sister.

“Should I not ride pillion behind ye?” Merry asked faintly. “’Tis unseemly for a lad to ride in such a manner, is it not?”

“We’ve not far to go,” he murmured, his breath hot against her ear.

He wrapped his arm tighter around her waist then, allowing his fingers to rest lightly on her hipbone. It felt simply right to hold her, and in her presence, he felt more peace than he’d felt in years.

Neither spoke after that.

And gently nudging Diabhul’s side, they cantered down the road that led to the village. With Merry on his back, the horse turned at once biddable, and he was a pleasure to ride, his gait smooth and strong. It was a ride that Ewan didn’t want to end, but all too soon, they rounded a bend in the road and the acrid stench of a tannery assaulted his nostrils.

The village was small. Chickens and geese scattered before them as they rode up to the largest building, little more than a hovel with hides tacked over the windows.

A man with dye-stained hands stepped out to greet them cautiously.

Swinging down from Diabhul, Ewan met Alec with the injured gelding, and the bargaining began. The trade was a fairly quick one and favored the pleased tanner. He’d had little to offer, but what he did have was enough for them: two leather saddlebags filled with oats, pasties, ale, and a few dried fish.

Swinging the bags over his shoulder, Ewan strode to where Alec, Lothar, and Merry stood eating meat pies filled with pork fat.

“Aye, and a right bonny saddle it was, too,” Merry was saying, nibbling on the crust of her pie. “’Twas my brother’s gift to me—a saddle fit for a nobleman.”

“Then ye should demand Ewan repay ye,” Alec said with his trademark spark of mischief in his eye. Clearly, his mood had improved. “Ewan’s heir to an earldom, is he not?”

Ewan stepped forward, his face marred by a frown. “Dinna loosen your lips, Alec,” he warned, casting an eye about before turning back to them. “What saddle is this ye speak of?”

“The saddle the lad sold to pay for our freedom,” Alec answered with a yawn. “Ye owe him, Ewan.”

“And was Ewan the only one set free?” Lothar asked suddenly.

They glanced at him in surprise. ‘Twas always a bit startling when the man chose to speak.

“’Tis no matter,” Merry said quickly, devouring her meat pie in several large bites.

She wiped her lips then with the back of her cuff, and Ewan found his gaze riveted upon them. Her lips were plump, soft. Aye, begging to be kissed. All at once, he was consumed with the temptation to bring his mouth down upon hers in a claiming kiss.

“Shall we be going?” she asked with a seemingly puzzled frown.

It was then that Ewan realized that both he and Alec had been staring. They both cleared their throats at once, as Lothar once again folded his arms. Turning on his heel, Ewan stepped away distraught.

He was behaving foolishly.

Aye, he needed to return Merry to Ruan’s care as quickly as possible, and he’d not rest until he saw it done. He’d hoped to be in Scotland before sundown, but the sun was already low in the sky and they still had far to go.

Wordlessly, they mounted, and pulling Merry up behind him to ride pillion this time, he set a grueling pace heading north.

Aware of Merry upon his back, Diabhul behaved well, and the ride was a pleasant one. And there was something about Merry’s closeness that soothed Ewan’s soul, and though he tried his very best to deny it, the sensation of her breasts occasionally pressed against his back, quite delighted him as well.

He could almost feel at peace in her presence. It wasn’t her beauty —though he found her a lass of striking comeliness, tall and willowy. No, it was her heart that appeared to be melting his, and he rode for a time, forgetting all other thoughts and simply enjoying the heady elation of being near her.

As the sun set in a deep, rich splendor, fading to no more than a faint glow on the horizon, he pulled rein near a knot of tall, sweeping pines and announced they’d be riding no more that night. They had a small fire crackling in no time, and after a meal of mainly dried fish, rolled into their cloaks to sleep.

Lothar taking the first watch, Ewan settled under a nearby tree in the vain hope of finding rest.

The night was a clear one, and the late spring air had only a touch of chill. Through the dark branches above, he could see the stars bright in the sky. Altogether, it was wholly peaceful.

Or, it would have been if he hadn’t rested his head in his arms and closed his eyes.

Aye, he fell asleep fast enough. And just as quickly, the dreams came. The screams of dying men. The blood on his sword. The graves of nameless, faceless men.

Startled, he sat up, gasping for breath, losing interest at once in sleep. Moving, he propped himself against one of the saddles tossed down near the fire and prepared for another long, sleepless night.

And then, from the corner of his eye, he saw Merry rise. Gliding silently his way, she stepped up behind him and gently lay her cloak about his shoulders.

He looked up, surprised.

Crouching next to him, she lifted a finger and rubbed it along his

scratchy jaw. “Tell me what keeps ye from sleeping, Ewan,” she said softly.

He stared into her brown eyes, feeling almost as if he were drowning in them before he glanced away to study the night sky. The stars were bright, and the full moon was high. He could see the silhouettes of the leaves gently dancing in the wind.

Aye, he’d much rather think of anything other than what haunted him in sleep.

“This night will bring a chill,” he said, cocking a brow at the sky. And removing the cloak, he handed it back to her. “Ye’ll be needing this more than I, lass.”

She merely stared at him. “Do ye confide in no one, Ewan?” she asked.

He blinked, surprised at her stubbornness. “There’s nothing to confide,” he lied. “Now, off with ye—”

“I canna forget the man I slew,” she said. A look of sorrow entered her eyes. “Aye, I dinna think I’ll ever forget his face.”

His heart pulled at the sight of her, and he wanted to gather her in his arms and hold her closely to his chest. Instead, he settled for an awkward pat of her hand and a confession. A confession that caught even himself off-guard.

“I only remember the face of the first one,” he said, briefly closing his eyes to see again the first man he’d ever killed in the heat of battle. He shivered and then looking down at her, added, “I dinna think it ever fades. But know ye this, lass. The man ye slew would have killed us all. Ye had no choice.”

“I know.” She nodded, and then moving closer, she laid a hand on his knee. “And the same to ye, Ewan. The men who have died by your sword would have killed ye the same. And if they had, ye wouldna now be here, aye?”

He gave a bitter laugh. “Aye, but I canna help but wonder if that is a travesty of justice,” he said, surprised to find the words falling so easily from his lips. But he couldn’t seem to stem the flowing tide. “I’ve slain many in the name of law and order, in wars ordered by the king. But, was I an instrument of justice or simply a pawn in the games of power that men play? I am told I am bold and brave, but my sword now only grows heavier each time I lift it.”

She sat there, awash in the moonlight, her brown eyes wide as she listened with rapt attention.

And then a wealth of emotion broke inside him, and words he’d never thought to voice came pouring forth.

“Many times I tried to leave,” he whispered brokenly. “But I could not. Revenge and sorrow eat my soul. Revenge for those I’ve seen die by another’s sword—brothers, all of them. And sorrow for those dying

by my blade! I'm so weary of the smell of blood! I dinna know what to seek now. If only I could walk away, truly walk away from it all."

Dimly, he was aware she was moving in front of him, and then reaching up, she cradled his head in both of her hands.

"Ye can take my hand when you're ready, Ewan," she whispered, giving his cheek a soft kiss. "I can help ye walk away from it all."

He closed his eyes and leaning forward, rested his forehead against hers in an intimate caress.

Peace. Aye, he found peace in her presence—a soft, healing grace flowing from her touch. He didn't speak. It wasn't necessary, not with her. Somehow, she seemed to understand his pain.

He didn't know how long they stayed there that way, but he knew it was a long time. Finally, with a heavy heart, he whispered, "Ye deserve a man worthy of ye, Merry."

She pulled back at that and to his surprise, laughed. "Aye, and that is true enough," she said, her lips curving into a broad smile.

He attempted to smile in return, but ultimately, the effort failed.

"Let the pain go, Ewan," she said with a steady gaze. "Let it go afore it consumes ye, lad."

He didn't say anything. He merely clenched his jaw. Aye, his jaw ached from the constant clenching of it. 'Twas a wonder he still had teeth.

She rolled her eyes at him then. "And I may just get angry at ye if ye canna do better than that," she said, sitting back on her heels and hugging her knees. "Do ye think I know naught of a heart filled with pain and how to let it go?"

He held still. The thought of her suffering stabbed his heart through with a pain akin to a sword wound. He knew well she understood grief and misery. She'd nearly lost her life as a lassie by the hand of one of the cruelest men he had ever met.

Yet here she was, sitting before him now, high-spirited, adventurous. Aye, clearly living life to the fullest.

"How do ye live with the pain of it all?" he asked in wonder. "How do ye live with the memories?"

Merry shrugged. "I dinna think of him anymore. I haven't in years." She gave a little laugh as her lips twisted into a dry smile. "Though, it seems my ill-fated marriage is all everyone else thinks of. But I canna mind that. I choose to live in the day I'm in, not in a memory from the past. I've learned that each dawn brings with it a chance to experience something new, something exciting that I've never done afore. 'Tis magical really, is it not? A chance to start anew *every day?"*

And then moving to settle beside him, she leaned her head companionably against his shoulder.

He didn't speak after that. He didn't feel the need to.

Looping his thumb over hers, he closed his eyes.

* * *

Ewan woke to the warmth of the sun on his face—not the thin pale sun heralding the dawn, but the hot heat of a lazy afternoon.

"Are ye dead?" Alec's amused voice asked, accompanied by a sharp jab on the shoulder.

Ewan groggily opened his eyes and swatted the stick that Alec was poking him with to the side.

It was broad daylight.

Startled, he sat up abruptly.

"I dinna think I've ever seen ye sleep afore, Ewan," Alec observed with interest. "Without being caught in the throes of fever, that is."

But Ewan scarcely heard him. Rising swiftly to his feet, he glanced around in slight confusion. "'Tis late. What happened?"

A short distance away, Lothar and Merry were adjusting the cinches of the saddles. The fire had long died, and the sun was definitely beginning its afternoon descent.

"Ye slept," Alec answered with a dry chuckle. Leaning forward, he punched him companionably on the arm. "Mayhap 'tis a once in a lifetime event. Should we name the year for it?"

Ewan passed a hand over his face. There was no fever. He felt well enough.

In fact, he hadn't felt so well in quite some time.

And feeling almost downright light-hearted, he consumed a pasty and, mounting Diabhul once again, was soon galloping down the road toward Scotland with Merry's arms clasped firmly about his waist.

An hour later, they crested a rise to see a stone wall running along the border of a forest, and shouting at the top of their voices, they drove their horses on.

They'd arrived.

They were home.

Alec broke into song as they cantered down the road and as Merry joined him, singing loudly in Ewan's ear, Ewan found himself smiling once again. Ach, 'twas becoming a habit.

It was a few minutes later when Ewan heard it.

The call of a bird.

But it wasn't a bird at all.

'Twas a man's whistle—a whistle of warning.

With a deep line of worry etching his face, Ewan pulled on the reins and raised his arm for the others to halt.

"We're being followed," he announced.

Chapter Seven – There's No Honor in a Cunningham!

Merry cast an anxious glance over her shoulder and wrapped her arms tightly around Ewan's waist as he guided Diabhul off the road. She couldn't see anyone, but the forest was thick and dark and provided many places to hide. Watchful and wary, they pushed deeper into the woodlands, pausing at intervals to listen, but there was no further sign of pursuers.

As the sun sank in the horizon, Merry closed her eyes and rested her cheek against Ewan's strong back. She'd stayed awake far too late the night before, holding his hand as he'd slept and too afraid to move lest she waken him. She smiled wryly. She needn't have worried; it had taken Alec quite some time to make him open his eyes. But now, she only wanted to sleep, and it seemed ages before they finally stopped.

Moonlight glistened on the water as they splashed through a burn to a fern-filled meadow to make a watchful camp for the night. They spoke little and, after a fitful night, left with the dawn.

The next day passed in the same watchful manner, and some of the next.

They'd just taken back to the main road when only a short time later, they heard the whistle once again.

Urging his horse abreast to Ewan's, Alec suggested in a low voice, "Hermitage is not far. 'Twould be safer to travel there."

"Aye, I've thought of it once or twice," Ewan agreed softly.

But then narrowing his eyes, he nodded his chin at an ancient spreading oak hanging over the road just a short distance away.

Alec waggled his brows in understanding and then wheeled his horse around, waving for Lothar to follow. With a clatter of hooves, the two galloped back the way they'd come.

Merry, curious, was on the verge of asking Ewan to explain when he drew rein under the spreading oak and swung down from the saddle.

"Be quick, lass," he murmured urgently as he pointed to the clump of trees and underbrush a few yards away. "Hide Diabhul in yon thicket and wait there, aye? We've set a snare for our followers."

He turned to go, but Merry reached down and caught his arm. "Take care, Ewan," she said softly. "I dinna want to see ye hurt."

For a brief moment, the corner of his lip lifted in what could have been a smile, and then resting his hand upon her leg in a light caress, he replied, "There's no need to fret. Now hie ye off and be quick. Alec will lead them here shortly."

She didn't need to be told again.

Maneuvering Diabhul into the underbrush was easy enough. He was used to hiding with her. For years, they'd oft evaded Ruan and Bree that way, and within a few moments, she was crouching by the horse's side, peering through the leaves.

Ewan had positioned himself on a low overhanging branch, and she found him an immediate distraction. From her position, she could admire the clean square line of his shoulders to her heart's content. There was no denying that the man was a handsome one, from his strong arms to his lean, hard thighs.

And his heart.

She sighed.

How she wished she could ease his burden.

But then Lothar and Alec wandered into view, both slouched in the saddle and conversing as if they hadn't a care in the world. They had scarcely disappeared past Ewan's hiding place when a man appeared, riding a white highland pony.

Ewan waited until the newcomer was directly beneath him before dropping from the tree. Knocking the man from his horse, he grabbed him by the hair and thrust a dagger beneath his ear.

"Your name," he hissed. "Tell me right quickly!"

The man frowned but answered readily enough. "I've no quarrel with ye, MacLean. Airril, Airril Cunningham."

At that, Alec burst out from the nearby shrubbery. "Cunninghams!" he spat angrily. "I should throttle ye with my bare hands."

"Ye haven't a prayer at that, Montgomery," the man replied snidely. "A lily-livered Montgomery doesna have the strength to harm a Cunningham—"

"Enough!" Ewan cut in crisply. Clenching his jaw in what could only be disgust, he shoved the man aside and sheathed his dirk with a noticeably aggravated thrust. "What cause do ye have to follow us?"

"He followed ye at my bidding," a new voice answered.

Merry peered to the right to see a young, rail-thin man approach on a white battle charger. He was followed by a dozen or so men. Removing his hat, he brushed his brown hair back from a receding hairline and peered down at Ewan with unsettling blue eyes.

"I wasna certain 'twas ye, Ewan MacLean, heir to the Earldom of Mull," he said, slowly articulating each word.

Raising a cool brow, Ewan dropped his hand upon his sword and asked, "And who are ye that ye think to know so much of me?"

The man shrugged and, drawing rein beside Ewan, dismounted.

With a respectful bow, he drawled, "All know ye to be a man deadly with a sword." His steely eyes dropped to linger on Ewan's hand still resting upon his hilt. "I and my men mean ye no harm. I'd

not be daft enough to cross blades with ye."

"'Tis wise," Ewan said with a mirthless chuckle, but he didn't move his hand. "Dinna think to make an enemy of me, stranger. Mine is not a short-lived wrath."

"Aye," the man agreed with a nod, and then sweeping his arm in another courtly bow, he added, "Allow me to introduce myself properly. Hugh. Lord Hugh Cunningham of Kerelaw Castle."

At that, Alec snorted in derision. "Kerelaw? Have ye rebuilt the place or are ye lord of rubble?"

The men behind Hugh began to shout and swear. A few drew their swords, but Hugh raised an imposing hand, and they fell into a reluctant silence.

With disgust written upon his face, Hugh turned upon Alec, and his tone turned snide as he answered, "Nay, Kerelaw is as it was since your cowardly clan razed it to the ground nigh on ten years ago. But the land is mine still, and we visit the place often in the reminder we've yet to avenge such wanton destruction."

"And do ye—" Alec began hotly.

But Ewan raised his voice to cut him short. "Silence! Now is not the time to settle this feud."

Alec's nostrils flared, but he nodded and stepped aside.

With his lips thinning in obvious distaste, Ewan turned coldly back to Hugh. "And why did ye follow me, Hugh? Be quick. I've little time to spare."

"I've tidings to share, but I had to be certain 'twas ye and not someone else," Hugh replied, sending Alec another look of repulsion. "The last I'd heard, ye were rotting in an English tower thanks to that Montgomery."

"Aye, and 'tis a strange turn of events how I ended up there," Alec observed heatedly.

"Are ye implying the Cunninghams had ought to do with it?" one of the men demanded furiously from behind Hugh.

"'Tis telling you were so quick to think I implied it!" Alec rounded on him.

But again, Ewan stayed him with a hand.

Alec swore under his breath and struggled to regain control. It took a moment before he managed to nod and step back once more.

"Aye then," Hugh eyed him coldly before smiling at Ewan in invitation. "Come, take rest and sup with us. We've mutton and ale aplenty, and I've tidings of the prince to share."

"I'll not be eating at your table," Alec interrupted before Ewan could even reply. "'Twould likely be poisoned."

"Aye, your mug *might*, Montgomery," a new voice hissed from amongst the Cunningham men.

Shouting, “Away with ye!” Alec lunged.

But Ewan intercepted him, pulling him back. His muscles rippled in sinuous waves at the effort as he hissed into his ear.

Merry couldn’t hear the words, but Alec fell silent at once, subdued.

And then adopting a firm stance, Ewan addressed the Cunninghams in a voice of command. “Stay your tongues and hold your swords! There will be no bloodshed here. We stand as brothers, fighting for our prince’s cause, do we not?”

Hugh nodded slowly and lifting his hand once again, ordered in a dispassionate tone, “As the MacLean says, so be it.”

“Then let us speak,” Ewan said, eyeing him suspiciously. “We’ll join ye for a good meal, but make it a useful one. I would hear news of Stirling ere I leave your company.”

“I’ll not be joining—” Alec began heatedly.

But Ewan quelled him with a single lift of his brow, and then turning to Hugh, added, “Clan Cunningham has no quarrel with the MacLeans nor with those who travel with them. Aye?”

It was clearly a warning.

Looking grim, Hugh nodded. Once.

And then Ewan whistled, bidding Merry and Lothar to step out from their hiding places, and the entire party set out on a westerly course.

Mutton and ale. Merry’s mouth watered at the thought. It had been nigh on a month since she’d had a full meal, but she wasn’t certain she could eat it, either. Hugh Cunningham’s cold, intense eyes made her shiver. He reminded her of a snake and the kind of person who just *might* use poison.

They didn’t travel far. At the next clearing, men dismounted, fires were lit, and legs of mutton produced along with bannocks and skins of wine and ale.

Choosing a sunny spot on the grass, Hugh invited them to join him.

As soon as they were seated—Alec, quite reluctantly—Hugh began in a conversational tone, “‘Tis right glad I am that ye escaped, Ewan. We’ll have need of your strong arm in battle soon enough, no doubt. I’ve often wondered where ye learned such skill with a sword?”

Ewan merely eyed him. “What news of the prince and the king?” he asked, abruptly switching subjects.

Hugh didn’t seem to mind. “Just a few days ago, I left the prince at Linlithgow in the safekeeping of the Earl of Lennox. The king has now openly engaged us in battle, or he gave it a feeble attempt, anyway.” His fine nostrils flared in disgust. “He’s a coward, nothing more. At the first sign of danger, he fled, deserting his own men on

the field. Aye, he even abandoned the very men he gave as hostages, those he'd sworn to protect."

Alec sniffed, clearly desiring to disparage the king but reluctant to agree with a Cunningham. He was obviously conflicted.

Merry almost smiled. Instead, she reached over and gave Alec's knee a sympathetic pat.

"Did ye expect aught else from our sovereign?" Ewan grunted. "James is a fool of the highest order. Where is he now?"

"He slunk back to Edinburgh like a dog with his tail tucked atween his legs," Hugh answered in a scathing tone. "He's in dire need of supporters now that your cousin, the Lord Julian Gray, has turned most of his former supporters against him. Lord Gray has a tongue of silver, he does."

"Aye," Ewan agreed shortly.

Lord Gray. Merry thoughtfully pursed her lips, recalling the few occasions she'd seen the man. He'd been a dashing, flaxen-haired rogue with the reputation of drifting from scandal to scandal until he'd met a Venetian beauty and had fallen madly in love.

Merry took a deep breath and smiled.

He must have found true love to have changed so.

Cupping her chin between her hands, she dreamily observed Ewan.

Would true love help him to live again? Would he turn back into the laughing, light-hearted Ewan she'd always admired?

Her eyes dipped over his body. 'Twas powerfully proportioned and lethally hard.

Mayhap she didn't *quite* want the same Ewan she'd always admired. Nay, she'd prefer a more passionate Ewan, one who would kiss her until her knees collapsed, one whose hands would touch—she swallowed, suddenly discovering his gaze boring straight through hers.

She tore her eyes from his and glanced away, slightly embarrassed to realize she'd been openly staring.

"Huntly, Erroll, Marishal, and Glamis no longer support the king," Hugh was saying.

Turning back to Hugh, Ewan replied in a clipped tone, "If Julian has convinced Huntly to abandon the Loyalists then the king is truly doomed. He'll not last the summer."

Hopelessly distracted from the somber tone of his words, Merry permitted herself a small smile and closed her eyes. Aye, she could listen to the soft melodic lull of his voice forever.

They spoke more of battle plans then, and supporters lost and gained, but Merry paid little heed.

Instead, she let her thoughts cavort around Ewan—a bare-chested,

ardent Ewan, devouring her with kisses and licking every inch of her skin. She smiled privately and wondered how shocked he would be could he see into her thoughts for one brief moment.

The food arrived then.

And though Alec staunchly refused to take even one bite, Merry found it too tempting to resist. She sat, sipping her wine, grateful for the warmth it spread through her veins as Alec folded his arms and stared straight ahead with a determined set of his jaw.

Finally, Hugh gave a short bark of a laugh and said, “Aye, and I’ve no dispute with ye, Ewan MacLean.”

Ewan didn’t reply but instead reached over and casually helped himself to Hugh’s dirk. Unsheathing the weapon, he balanced it in his hand for a moment and ran his finger along the blade.

They all watched in uncomfortable silence.

“Alec is dearer than a brother to me,” Ewan murmured softly, his eyes still on the dirk. “And I look after those I name as such.”

Hugh gave a stiff nod.

Twirling the dirk, Ewan handed it back, hilt first. “A nice blade ye have. ‘Tis sharp enough to slit a man’s throat quick, aye?” His eyes locked unblinkingly on Hugh’s.

The veiled threat couldn’t be missed.

Hugh visibly swallowed. “Aye,” he said, taking the dirk back and sheathing it quickly.

After a considerable pause, Ewan rose to his feet. “Then we’ll be on our way. I thank ye for the tidings and the meal.”

As Hugh exchanged final words with Ewan, Merry and Alec returned to the horses.

Planting a kiss on Diabhul’s cheek, Merry checked the cinch and then, rummaging through the saddlebags, found a dry bannock from the day before.

Whistling at Alec, she slapped the saddle to get his attention. “Take this,” she offered.

“Thank ye, kindly,” he murmured, choking a little on the first bite.

“Aye, ‘tis dry.” She smiled and, stepping around Diabhul, reached over to pound Alec on the back and hand him her waterskin.

He eyed it suspiciously.

“I swear ‘tis just water from the burn,” she promised with a chuckle. “It has a right peaty taste to it though.”

Tilting his head back, he took several generous swallows and then wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Assessing her up and down with a keen eye, he leaned close and murmured, “Ye’ve yet to tell me your name, lass.”

Merry withdrew with a scowl of warning.

But there was no way he could have been overheard. The wine

had lightened the spirits of the men about her, and the air was peppered with loud laughter and ribald jests.

Suddenly, she became aware of Ewan's eyes upon her and as she watched, he detached himself from Hugh and strode over to join her.

Hugh followed.

Extending a leather mug to Alec, the Cunningham asked in a sarcastic drawl, "Did ye feed well, Montgomery? Would ye not care to drink now?"

Alec's nostrils flared and he struck the offered cup out of the man's hand. "I'll not be falling prey to ye and your men, Cunningham," he hissed.

Leaning forward, Hugh replied in an equally menacing tone, "Ye're fool enough to, I'll warrant."

"Enough," Ewan warned, his face reserved and forbidding as he caught Diabhul's bridle and backed the horse between the men, forcing them to stand apart.

The two men glared at one another from across the black stallion's saddle.

And then Alec lifted his chin in outright challenge. "The Cunninghams are a festering boil on the arse," he said with a deep growl.

As Hugh's face took on a murderous expression, Ewan rounded upon Alec. "Not another word from ye. Not one!" he raised his voice, and pointing to Lothar still feasting under a nearby tree, he added, "Make yourself useful and fetch Lothar. Be quick about it."

Alec obeyed at once.

But as he strode away, Merry caught a malicious glint in Hugh's eyes. She shivered. The sooner they were gone from the Cunninghams' company, the better.

"And where are ye bound?" Hugh asked, once Alec had gone.

"My destination is my own," Ewan replied roughly, adopting a rigid stance.

Hugh's eyes narrowed, clearly displeased. "I only ask to warn ye," he said stiffly. "The rivers are swollen from the recent rains, and the bridge to Stirling is washed out, if you're headed that way."

"Then, I thank ye for the tidings," Ewan replied, his arms crossed and his feet still widely placed apart.

A deadly pall settled over the conversation.

And then Alec returned with Lothar in tow, but upon spying his horse, the Frank pulled up short, swearing under his breath.

"I'll not be riding that beast nor wearing that cloak," he announced, drawing his thick brows into a frown. "'Tis ill luck."

All eyes followed his to see a raven perched upon the horn of his saddle. One black foot resting upon the worn leather and the other

upon the cloak Lothar had tossed over the saddle for safekeeping.

"Do ye still believe that superstitious drivel?" Alec rolled his eyes. With an impatient sigh, he shooed the crow away. "I'll trade ye horses and cloaks then. I wish to be gone from here."

Lothar grinned, pleased.

And with a final nod of farewell, they mounted their steeds and left the place, setting a northerly course.

But they had gone no more than a league before Lothar whistled to Alec.

"I care not for this horse, nor this cloak," he grumbled. "I'll take back my own."

"And what of ill luck?" Alec teased.

"'Tis upon your shoulders now," the Frank replied with a rare smile. "You sat in the saddle and wore my cloak afore I did."

They bantered back and forth until they finally settled the matter by exchanging horses and cloaks once again.

But only a few minutes later, Ewan abruptly drew rein, and cocking his head to one side, announced softly, "We're still being followed."

Everyone froze.

"Shall we fight?" Alec asked, his hand dropping to his sword.

The muscle on Ewan's jaw twitched. "Nay," he replied. "Let that be our last recourse."

Twisting in the saddle, Merry scanned the trees, seeing nothing. "Are ye sure?" she whispered.

But the words had scarcely left her mouth before five men clad in dark cloaks burst through the trees behind them.

"Cunninghams!" Alec yelled, and then spat.

"Then we fight," Ewan said in a voice that rumbled like thunder. Twisting back to Merry, he added, "I'll not see ye harmed. Take cover in yonder wood."

Circling her waist with a hard arm he swept her down to the ground without waiting for her to agree. She wouldn't have argued anyway. She could shoot arrows much better from a distance.

As she ran for cover, Ewan wheeled Diabhul around with a blood-chilling war cry, and drawing his sword, met the men head on. But at the last moment, their attackers evaded him entirely, swerving to the side to descend upon Lothar like a swarm of flies. And as Merry reached the nearest tree, she heard the hideously sickening sound of blade upon bone followed by Lothar's bloodcurdling scream.

Shaking, she notched an arrow to the string and whirled, just in time to see Lothar fall from his horse into the grass.

And then Ewan was there, moving in a blur. He dispatched the first attacker and seizing his weapon, launched it like a javelin straight

into the heart of the second before either realized what had happened. Spinning Diabhul around, Ewan attacked again, engaging the third man as Alec beheaded the fourth.

But the headless man's horse collided into Diabhul, causing the frightened stallion to rear, and Ewan was thrown to the ground.

Merry gasped in horror, but Ewan leapt to his feet in an effortlessly fluid motion, and raising his sword, faced the horseman racing toward him with his sword aimed low.

Merry cried out in warning.

For a moment, it seemed as though Ewan had been struck. He flinched, stepping back, and her heart leapt into her throat.

But then his strong arm snaked out and catching the Cunningham's leg, he tore the man from the saddle and the next moment, the man lay dead at his feet.

There was only one attacker left.

With a virulent curse, Ewan set off toward him at a dead run, giving a growl of such ferocity that the man went pale and ran his horse back the way it had come.

And just as quickly as it had begun, it was over.

With her heart hammering fiercely in her chest, Merry ran to Lothar's side, arriving the same time as Alec and Ewan. The Frank was still alive, but his face was as white as death. Multiple wounds cut across his chest, and blood soaked his clothing. He was cradling his arm tightly to his chest.

It took her a moment to realize, but then she understood.

Lothar had lost his hand.

Turning her head away, she was sick.

"There's no honor in a Cunningham!" Alec shouted, raising his sword above his head. "I'll ride back and slay them all—"

"Dinna follow," Ewan ordered him sternly. "There will be time enough for vengeance later. We must see to Lothar now." And then kneeling next to the injured man, he began tearing his cloak into strips all the while speaking in calm, low tones. "I've seen worse, lad, and in far weaker men. We'll get ye to Hermitage. There's a priest there who is blessed with the gift of healing. He'll have ye on your feet soon enough."

Lothar's frightened eyes locked onto Ewan's, taking comfort from his composed strength.

"Your wounds are not deep but for the hand," Ewan judged after a quick inspection. "And 'tis a clean cut. With the priest's aid, ye'll not suffer from the deadly fevers."

The Frank swallowed, and his white lips trembled. "And what use is a warrior without his sword hand?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"If ye still wish to fight then take up the sword with the other,"

Ewan answered in a rough yet gentle tone as he began to tightly bind the man's stump. "But if ye are a wise man, ye'll find yourself a lass and fight battles of another kind, aye?"

As he continued to speak in a slow, measured manner to the shocked man and bind his numerous wounds, Merry turned away with shaking knees. She'd never seen so much blood, nor had she known the smell of it. She only wanted to retch.

She stumbled to where Alec stood a short distance away, looking dazed.

"So quick," she whispered, drawing a shaky breath. "It happened so quickly."

"There's no honor in a Cunningham!" Alec spat viciously.

She was inclined to agree.

Closing his eyes then, Alec whispered, "I am to blame. They went after him, thinking he was me. 'Tis the only thing that makes sense. They dinna see that we'd traded the horses and cloaks back, not until 'twas too late." He choked. "They were coming for me—"

Merry felt the horror of what he said, knowing he spoke the truth.

"Enough, Alec," Ewan said, rising to his feet. He cast an eye toward the darkening sky. "Hermitage is just past yon hill. Ye'll stay here with him until I can return with a litter and the priest. I'll not be gone long."

"Aye," Alec whispered, grimly looking down upon the Frank trembling with pain.

Then turning to Merry, Ewan waved toward Diabhul standing nervously a short distance away. "Mayhap ye should bring him close. He's not likely to trust me again for a time."

Wordlessly, Merry followed his bidding, calmly mounting the horse and walking him over to Ewan. And once he'd eased himself slowly into the saddle, they set off.

Dark clouds shrouded the sun as they headed down the narrow glen at a gallop, leaping over the low shrubs and taking a narrow path through the ferns and bracken.

Merry heard the river long before seeing it. Swollen by recent rains, it had overrun its banks, and drawing Diabhul up short on the edge of a small overhang, Ewan paused only long enough to shout a "Hold tight!" before digging his heels into the horse's side. With a heart-stopping wrench, the horse jumped off the ledge and plunged directly into the cold rushing water.

Merry gasped as the icy water splashed over her head. And then they broke the surface, and she could feel Diabhul's strong muscles working beneath her as he swam through the dark swirling current. It didn't take long before they were pulling themselves out of the water onto the other side, slipping over the moss and lichen-covered rocks.

It was difficult to see through the gathering darkness, but they galloped onward, and less than a league later, a castle materialized in their pathway, rising up from the bleak moorlands surrounding it.

It was a sinister-looking place. Hart's-tongue fern grew from the crevices of its damp walls, and Merry spied a cat slinking along the ramparts. As they drew closer, they came upon a corpse hanging from a tree, left to rot, and they had to hold their sleeves up to their faces to ward off the stench.

Finally, they reached the black portcullis, weary and still soaked to the bone.

The gate was closed, but from somewhere deep inside the gatehouse, a faint light glowed, and after a moment, a burly, bald-headed man stepped out. Holding a torch aloft, his callous expression shifted into one of welcome the moment he recognized Ewan.

"Show me to your mistress at once," Ewan ordered without preamble.

With a nod, the man led them to a brightly lit courtyard nestled between two tall towers, and they'd scarcely dismounted before a side-door swung open, and a delicate woman rushed out to greet them.

Her eyes were bright blue, her skin a creamy white with a sprinkle of fine freckles dusting her nose, and the curls bouncing around her face were a flaming red. She wore a crimson gown covered by a mantle of soft smooth wool trimmed with lambskin, and her thin waist was circled by a silver-threaded belt with a ring of keys dangling importantly from it.

"My lord, 'tis a wondrous pleasure to receive ye," she welcomed Ewan graciously. There was a refined quality to her speech. She was clearly a lady.

Ewan dismounted and dipped into a courtly half-bow. "I need men, and right quickly. We were attacked by Cunninghams, and one of my men lies gravely wounded on the far side of the river."

"Say no more!" she cried, clasping her hands. "My man will provide ye with whatever ye need."

As Merry swung down from the saddle to join him, Ewan turned to her and said, "Stay here and rest. I'll be back soon enough."

He didn't wait for her reply. Spinning on his heel, he followed the bald-headed man and disappeared into the darkness.

Giving Merry only a cursory glance, the lady addressed a maid standing by her side. "See this lad tended to and then prepare a fine chamber for my betrothed."

And then she left, leaving the delicate scent of roses trailing behind her.

It took Merry a moment to understand what she'd just heard, and

then the meaning hit her like a bolt of lightning, tearing her heart asunder.

Betrothed.

Ewan was *promised to another*.

Chapter Eight – What the Heart Wants

The distant thud of thunder heralded more rain as Ewan plodded wearily under Hermitage Castle's portcullis once again. It was long past midnight. Behind him, Alec and the others brought Lothar, barely conscious as he lay upon the litter hung between two horses.

As they reached the inner courtyard, a slim figure stepped out from a shadowed doorway to greet them.

It was Merry.

"I feared ye'd met with danger," she said, her fists clenched tightly by her side.

Ewan studied her from his horse, struck by the deepening lines of fatigue etched upon her face. She'd lost weight since Carlisle, her curves were more delicate now. She was pale and covered in mud and grime. But by far, he found the most striking change to be the sorrow in her brown eyes, a sorrow that hadn't been there before. A wave of yearning rippled through him, and he wanted nothing more than to sweep her into his arms, hold her close to his chest, and whisper words of comfort into her ears.

But it was his duty to see Lothar settled first.

The man's face was deathly pale, and his closed eyes were ringed with dark circles. For a moment, Ewan wasn't certain he still lived, but as the litter was carefully removed from the horses' backs, Lothar gasped.

The sound renewed Ewan's hope, and leaning down from his horse, he encouraged in a rough, yet gentle tone, "Ye'll be on your feet again soon, lad. The worst is over."

Lothar didn't answer. His eyes remained closed as Alec and the others carried him into the castle. But as they passed her by, Merry's gaze dropped to the bandage covering the man's stump, caked with dry blood.

Swallowing hard, she looked away.

Ewan expelled a long breath.

And then willing himself to ignore the pain burning his side, he gritted his teeth and swung down from his horse. The red stain on his shirt had spread. He grimaced. If only he'd moved a little faster, he wouldn't have been injured, but there was naught he could do about it now. The jagged cut under his ribs wasn't a life-threatening wound, but he knew it should be tended.

But after the priest had seen to Lothar first.

Drawing his cloak closer to hide the blood, he stepped around his horse and faced Merry. Her eyes were downcast. She seemed strangely remote and unreachable, but he understood why.

Witnessing a battle was a gruesome thing.

He strode purposefully to her side and clamped a steadying hand upon her shoulder. “Hot-spiced wine is what ye need. Come with me,” he said softly.

She didn’t move, not until his hand slid up to cradle the nape of her neck and softly guide her into the castle.

They’d taken but a few steps inside before Iona rushed around the corner, nearly colliding into them. Her red hair flowed loosely over her shoulders, and the soft plaid artfully draped over her shift gave the impression that she’d just risen from bed. Or it would have, had not her lips been freshly stained with berries and her hair brushed to a sheen.

She’d clearly spent the hours since their greeting preparing for a seduction of some sort.

“Ewan!” she gasped, placing a hand on the creamy swell of her heaving bosom. “I’ve been fretting over ye.”

Ewan frowned. She would know the truth soon. He’d never truly intended to wed her, and he regretted now that his indifference had let matters progress this far. But he couldn’t tell her now. He had to inform her father first, and he wouldn’t publicly humiliate the lass. He owed her that, at least.

It took him a moment to realize that she was still speaking. “And I’ve prepared your chamber, my lord. Come with me, and I’ll see your needs well met.” She held out her soft hands, gesturing for him to follow.

Merry’s shoulders tensed beneath his fingers, and Ewan glanced down to see her usually expressive face blank and shuttered. Aye, the lass seemed drained of life. She’d waited for them in the dark, wet and exhausted. Concerned, he squeezed the back of her neck in a comforting gesture. “Let’s get ye that spiced wine, aye?”

Merry nodded stiffly.

“Forgive me.” Iona’s voice startled them both. “I seem to have forgotten your name, lad?”

At that, Ewan tensed, and suddenly aware his fingers still lingered upon Merry’s neck, he hastily withdrew his hand. ‘Twould be best for Merry to remain a lad still.

Stepping back, he replied gruffly, “I’ll be sleeping in the hall with my men, my lady. Have warm spiced wine sent, would ye?”

Iona nodded, but her keen eyes flickered over Merry expectantly.

“Moridac,” Merry replied then, clearing her throat and bowing slightly. “My name’s Moridac, my lady.”

Casting Merry a curious glance, Iona nodded and then with an overly sweet smile, she curtsied. “I’ll bring the wine at once, my lord.” Pivoting on her heel, she quickly disappeared.

When she had gone, Merry glanced up at Ewan. “Will Lothar live?” she asked in a choked whisper.

Ewan looked into her tortured eyes and taking her hands between his, gave them a gentle squeeze. “Lothar’s a braw man,” he answered truthfully. “The fact he lives still gives me great hope.”

They stood there, holding hands a moment and then Merry jerked free and turned away. He followed her up the steps to the main hall in silence.

The dying fire illuminated the hall only enough to reveal it as bleak and imposing as the rest of the castle. The rushes crackled beneath their feet as they picked their way over the sleeping servants to the main table lit by two tall tapers. But the candles did little to penetrate the heavy atmosphere of the place.

Nearby, a dog growled, but a man’s sharp command from the darkness silenced it.

“I wouldna have ye sleep here with the servants, my lord,” Iona’s sharp voice issued from the shadows before she stepped into the dim circle of light. She carried a goblet and a clay jug.

“I’ll not be dissuaded,” Ewan replied. He was tired. The cut across his ribs burned. He wanted to see Merry settled, Lothar tended, his own wound cleaned, and then he wanted to close his eyes and sleep. If sleep were at all possible. With the recent events, he knew well that his dreams would most likely be haunted.

Iona said nothing as she poured the wine into the goblet, and the enticing scent of cinnamon and cloves filled the air. And then smiling prettily, she offered him the cup with a little bow.

Ewan eyed the goblet. She’d only brought one. Taking it, he offered it to Merry first. “Drink,” he said. “Drink deeply, lad.”

Merry hesitated, but upon his insistence, took a deep draught, and when she’d finished, he took the jug from Iona and poured his own.

Iona waited patiently for him to finish, tapping her fingers lightly on the table.

And then wiping his mouth on his forearm, Ewan set the goblet down on the table with a bang. “I would see Lothar,” he announced before glancing down at Merry to add, “Stay here and rest. I’ll return soon.”

“Nay,” Merry disagreed with a flash of her brown eyes. “I’ll go with ye, and that’s the end of the matter.”

He almost smiled. That response was more the Merry he’d come to know. With a crisp nod of agreement, he glanced over at Iona only to see her watching them with a silent, curious gaze accompanied by a slight frown.

But noticing his eyes upon her, she quickly smiled and offered, “Allow me to take ye there, my lord. ‘Tis not far.”

Without further preamble, she led them out of the hall and hurried up the narrow spiraled stairs at a brisk pace before pausing in front of a wooden door.

As she reached for the latch, Ewan stayed her hand.

"I thank ye, Lady Iona, but ye may leave now," he suggested. "I'll see ye in the morn."

But she was persistent. "Shall I not sit with ye?" she asked, her red brows knitting into a frown.

"Nay, 'tis unseemly," he replied and then insisted. "Go."

He bowed curtly, and then placing an arm around Merry's shoulder, he opened the door and guided her inside.

Thankfully, Iona did not follow.

As the door clicked shut behind him, Ewan paused upon the threshold. It was a small, dark chamber with smoke-stained walls and a single window shuttered against the night wind.

Lothar lay unconscious on the bed. An elderly priest sat by his side as a maid with long red braids tended to the fire.

Alec lounged against the wall near the door.

The priest looked up as they entered. "God-willing, he'll live," he answered Ewan's unspoken question before shifting his attention back to the needle he'd been holding up to the light. With a squint, he finished threading it and turned back to Lothar.

Ewan closed his eyes, allowing himself to feel some measure of relief. He took a deep breath, but the effort caused his ribs to ache, and an unexpected wave of weakness assailed him.

He had to brace himself against the wall to keep from falling.

"God's Wounds, Ewan!" Alec's voice cursed. "What's this?"

Ewan grimaced at his own clumsiness and opened his eyes to see his cloak had gapped open enough to allow Alec to see his red-stained shirt.

"You're—" Alec began, reaching out.

But Ewan blocked his hand with a forearm and interrupted sternly, "Take care of the lad, aye?" He frowned and cast a quick glance at Merry standing by his side.

Alec hesitated a moment and then nodded. But first he moved to the priest and whispered in the man's ear.

"Later," Ewan warned with a scowl, but the priest had already risen.

"Come, Moridac," Alec said then, sweeping back to slide an arm around Merry's shoulders. "Lothar will live. I've yet to eat. Come with me, aye? We can come back soon enough, if ye wish."

Merry didn't resist as Alec fairly pushed her out of the door. She didn't even glance Ewan's way.

And that bothered Ewan tremendously.

But then the maid pulled a rough-hewn bench from around the bed, and the priest shoved him down onto it. And as they began to inspect his wound, he let his booted heels rest on the floor, his legs splayed out in front of him.

He closed his eyes, suddenly not wanting to even think.

* * *

It had been a long night, a night Merry felt would never end. Still drowsy from the spiced wine, she staggered tiredly after Alec down the dimly lit corridors leading to the dark and gloomy great hall.

When they arrived, Alec suddenly asked, "And why do ye follow us, lurking in the shadows, cousin?" His voice rang unnaturally loud in the darkness.

Merry tensed as Iona stepped out of the shadows to join them at the table, which was lit by two tapers. She'd drawn her plaid tightly about her shoulders, and she was holding a bottle of wine close to her chest.

"I would speak to ye of Ewan, cousin," she answered tightly.

Reaching over, Alec wrested the wine from her grasp and, drawing the cork with his teeth, tipped it back to drink straight from the bottle.

Iona sniffed in displeasure.

"There's naught for me to say," Alec said once he'd decided he'd drunk enough. "If ye have questions, ask the man himself."

Her eyes flashed at that. "I canna be so forward," she nearly growled. "Not yet. 'Tis a delicate situation. Though I do believe—"

Alec cast a quick glance Merry's way and then interrupted his cousin with a sharp warning. "Dinna be so certain that he'll fall into your net."

Iona snapped her mouth shut.

"Beauty alone willna guarantee your heart's desire," Alec continued, his tone taking on a finely edged sarcasm. "Particularly the kind of sweet-temper and beauty ye possess. Beauty such as yours is a curse, I'll warrant."

Missing the mockery in his voice, Iona arched her brows and graced him with a haughty smile. "Ye speak the truth. Beauty such as mine is the truest of burdens."

Alec grinned in outright amusement.

"'Tis fair distressing to suffer the envy of every woman I meet," she continued, heaving a sigh before adopting an even wearier tone to add, "And 'tis fair exhausting to be the object of all men's desire. 'Tis no small wonder women dinna wish me to stay long in the company of their husbands."

There was no regret in the woman's tone, only pride and conceit.

Alec stared at her astonished. "I pity the man to be chained to ye.

No one is deserving of such foul luck," he said, shaking his head.

Iona's eyes hardened then. Suddenly suspicious that she'd been the victim of a jest, she gave a cold, thin smile and, pivoting on her heel, left in a huff.

Merry was relieved to see her go.

"A foul-tempered beastie is what she is," Alec muttered under his breath.

Merry frowned thoughtfully. She hadn't really concerned herself with beauty before, but now that she thought on it, Iona did possess the creamy skin, blue eyes, and flaming red hair that many a man desired. And she was a lady. She was small of stature, her hands were soft, and she moved with a delicate grace that Merry could not even hope to mimic, not when she'd spent her entire life riding across the moors on the back of a horse.

Merry glanced down at her rider's hands and grimaced. Aye, she was too tall, too strong-featured, to lay claim to beauty.

Turning back to Alec, she saw his wide grin in the dim candlelight, and with a shake of her head, murmured, "She's bonny, a fitting wife for an earl."

Alec choked. "Bonny?" he asked, his eyes wide with shock. "Are ye daft?"

Merry frowned at him. "You're a man," she growled. "What would ye know of such things?"

A merry glint entered Alec's green eyes. "More than ye ever could, ye wee fool," he answered with a wink, and then all trace of laughter fled his face, and his mood soured swiftly. "A sorry wretch is what I'm destined to be, I fear. I'll live the remainder of my days pining for love and destined to be left wanting …" His words trailed off, and he fell silent.

But Merry was no longer listening. Sitting down at the table, she lay her head down upon her arms and closed her burning eyes. It seemed so long ago that she'd thought to cut her hair and set out on this grand adventure, masquerading as a lad.

But she was weary of it now.

She missed Skye. She missed the grandeur and beauty of the moors, the gulls riding the wind over the sea-stacked rocks of the MacLeod's Maidens, and the crisp air filled with the tang of the sea. Soon, the selkies would be barking on the shell-covered beaches.

She had thought to have an adventure. She hadn't expected such sorrow. Her heart swelled with sadness over Lothar's suffering. And Ewan's too. Aye, she felt sorrow for Ewan's haunted dreams.

But he should have warned her that he was betrothed. It was like an arrow to her heart. That is, if she still had one. At the moment, there was naught but an aching, empty spot where her heart had

been.

A deep loneliness swept over her as weariness descended upon her.

Sleep came then, but it was a restless sleep, filled with images of Ewan and Iona, their legs entwined, sharing long, breathless nights. And when the dawn arrived, she welcomed the rough shake of her shoulder and looked up into Alec's emerald eyes in relief.

"Let's wash afore the others, aye?" he suggested with a grin.

Rising to her feet, Merry stretched and glanced around the great hall. The place looked just as gloomy in the daylight as it had at night.

Alec led her to the kitchens, and even though the door was open to let in the morning sun, the place seemed dank and dark, nothing like Dunvegan's neatly scrubbed kitchens with their vaulted ceilings and jolly atmosphere. Here, the tables were cluttered with unwashed pots and trenchers bearing half-eaten food from the day before. Several scullery maids sat in a circle, plucking chickens. The white feathers flurried about Merry's feet like snowflakes as she passed by.

A lad stood by the hearth, ladling hot water into a bucket from a large cauldron boiling over the fire. Looking up as they approached, he hooked a thumb over his shoulder to a half-filled barrel in the corner. A table stood next to it with a linen towel, a bar of tallow soap, and an ox-horn comb tossed upon its surface. Above it, a shelf held a razor and a small polished silver mirror.

An empty wooden bathing tub had been shoved under the table, and Merry eyed it wistfully. There would be no bath for her. Not if she must play the part of a lad. She inspected her hands, observing the dirt embedded under her nails.

Alec seemed to read her mind. "Ye can wash your face, at least," he said with a warm smile.

Kneeling, they took turns plunging their arms into the barrel, washing not only their faces but their arms, shoulders, and hair as well. It was invigorating, refreshing, and by the time she'd finished, she felt alert once again.

Rising to her feet, she briskly dried her hair and was combing through the wet, snarled mess when she noticed Alec's eyes locked over her shoulder. Following his gaze, she saw Ewan framed in the door, backlit by the morning sun.

He looked haggard, his skin was pale and lines of strain were apparent between his brows. He'd changed into a long bleached linen shirt that hung loosely over breeches that fit snugly over his sinewy thighs. The clothes were flattering, calling attention to his hard muscled body, the body of a warrior.

With a dreamy sigh, she wondered what it would be like to slide her hand under his shirt and run her fingers along the ridges of his

stomach. And then the comb snagged in her hair, and suddenly aware of her thoughts, Merry quickly averted her gaze and turned away.

She was ashamed. Ewan was betrothed, and he'd never given her reason to hope. It was her own foolishness that had allowed herself to become attracted to him. Nay, if she were honest, she'd admit that her own foolishness had let herself fall in *love* with him.

And then she saw that he'd joined them by the barrel. In silence, he pulled his blond hair back into a ponytail and helped himself to the large bar of soft, yellow soap.

"Lothar?" Alec asked, offering him the razor and pointing to the mirror.

"He's sleeping," Ewan replied, working the soap into a lather. "He has a fever, but not a treacherous one. We can only pray 'twill stay that way."

"Then, that is well," Alec replied.

Ewan agreed with a grim nod. "He's a braw man. He'll live."

Merry said nothing. Stepping back, she watched from under her lashes as he took up the sharp razor and skimmed the blade skillfully over his jaw, contorting his face to shave his upper lip.

She swallowed another sigh.

Everything about the man was a distraction, from his broad shoulders to the lithe line of his thigh.

And then the familiar scent of lavender and roses wafted through the air and glancing over, Merry saw Iona standing a mere arm's length away.

Her eyes were locked on Merry, and for a brief moment, her face was unguarded, and the distaste, the disdain, was easy to see. Clearly, the woman didn't like her. She'd like her even less should she discover Merry's true gender.

But then Iona pushed by her and stepping up to Ewan, ran a hand over his shoulder as if to brush off the lint. It was an overtly possessive gesture.

Ewan moved back at once and raised a brow in a cool but polite inquiry.

"The clothing fits ye well, my lord," Iona said with a bright smile.

He just stood there, looking down at her with his blue eyes narrowing.

The silence stretched, becoming awkward.

And then Iona cleared her throat. "I have tidings, my lord," she said.

Ewan frowned. "They are?" he asked crisply.

"My father will return to Hermitage at the week's end." All at once, she seemed a little hesitant, unsure.

"Then, that is well," Ewan replied and returned to his shaving.

“Aye, ‘tis time we settled the matter,” Iona practically purred. She let her gaze trail down the length of Ewan’s body.

“Aye,” Ewan agreed readily enough.

She appeared to like that response. In fact, she looked quite giddy. With a fluttering of her lashes, she curtsied and quickly exited the kitchen but not before sending a scornful smile Merry’s way.

Merry grimaced. As bonny as Iona was, it was clear she was a two-faced woman. Merry could only shake her head. No doubt, Ewan was blinded by her beauty.

“A giant fool I never took ye for, Ewan,” she murmured under her breath.

“Fool?”

Merry jerked, surprised she’d said the words aloud. From the corner of her eye, she saw him peering down at her curiously. He stood close, smelling of soap and leather. It was fair difficult to think clearly. But pretending to possess a calm she didn't feel, she masked her feelings and finally replied, “I wish to congratulate ye, Ewan. Iona will make ye a fine bride.”

Ewan’s brow lifted, startled. He stood there a moment, as if grappling for words, but then with a frustrated breath, slammed his fist against the wall. Turning on his heel, he then left the kitchen without a word.

“Then ye know,” Alec’s voice said from behind her.

Merry didn’t reply.

Reaching over, he patted her on the head as if she were a wee lassie. “Dinna judge him too harshly, lass. ‘Tis a complicated matter. He’s a man sealed within himself. At times, he’s not easy to know.”

“I’m sure ‘tis a strong match,” Merry grated.

“The mere thought of it turns my stomach foul—” Alec began.

But Merry couldn’t hear anymore. “I dinna wish to speak now,” she said gruffly, refusing to meet his eyes. “I must tend to Diabhul.”

She ran out of the kitchens then and made her way to the stables. The lads there were quite relieved to give over Diabhul’s care and showed Merry his stall at once.

Relaxing, Merry ran her hand along the black stallion’s back and settled down to groom his coat to a sheen and to braid his mane and tail. As usual, Diabhul’s company soothed her, giving her the peace to collect her thoughts.

It was time she returned home.

Mayhap she should send Ruan a letter first. It might defuse his anger—or give him ample time to nurture it. She wasn’t entirely sure what his reaction would be.

She *had* succeeded in rescuing Ewan, even though he’d run straight into the arms of another woman.

With a frown, she picked up Diabhul's large hoof and brushed it clean.

Channeling her thoughts back to Ruan, she wondered how long his wrath would last. Would he understand she'd felt a life-debt? Most likely, he'd be so relieved to find her safe that he'd speak only a few harsh words.

Aye, she needed to return home. Where she wouldn't see Ewan again.

The thought was depressing—as was the frequency with which Ewan intruded upon her thoughts. The man had grown on her. Knowing Iona would be seeing him daily did not help matters either. And not just seeing him—but being in his arms.

"Ho, there, Moridac!" Alec's cheerful voice intruded upon her solitude.

Merry straightened to find Alec sprawling comfortably against the stall as if he'd been there for some time.

She frowned.

"That scowl 'tis a fine greeting," he said with a chuckle. And then he held out his hand. "'Tis time for the midday feast. I'm fair starving, and ye look as if ye could use a good meal."

"I'd rather have a mug of ale and a trencher of salted fish here," she said, pointing to the pile of straw in the corner of Diabhul's stall.

Alec's keen eyes narrowed. He watched her a few moments before saying softly, "Ewan may surprise ye yet."

Merry's frown deepened. Ewan had surprised her already. Horribly. She wasn't certain she cared for another such surprise. "In what way?" she asked sourly.

He hesitated, looking as if he wanted to say something, but finally thinking better of it, settled for shrugging his shoulders. "'Tis not for me to say, but come and keep me company at least. Am I not worthy of some kindness?"

There was seriousness in his tone that drew Merry's gaze, and she tensed at the look in his eye. For a fleeting moment, she thought she saw desire, but with his next words, she was certain she was wrong.

"Come now," he insisted with a wink, still holding his hand out. "There's a bonny green-eyed lass I've my eye on. Dinna keep me waiting."

Taking a deep breath, Merry nodded, but with a marked air of reluctance, followed him back to the castle.

Hermitage Castle's great hall was a hive of activity, but even in the broad light of day, the place was still depressingly gloomy.

A rather anemic looking lad sat by the fire with a lute in his hands, but he wasn't playing a tune. Instead, he stared unblinkingly, allowing his fingers to idly drift over the strings.

Pushing through the crowd, Merry spied Ewan at the high table, sitting in an ornately carved chair with Iona at his side. He was handsome. Rugged. Radiating power and vitality. His voluminous white shirt was open at the neck, and his flaxen hair was loose, falling about his shoulders in a way that made her want to run her fingers through it.

Clenching her jaw, Merry shifted her gaze to Iona. Alec was gravely mistaken. How could anyone doubt Iona's beauty? Clad in a fine white dress trimmed with gold-colored braid, she'd swept her flaming hair into a pearled net. A ruby hung about her neck, glittering on the swell of her bosom, and as she moved, the jewel caught the light of the candlelight.

When they reached the high table, Merry automatically dipped into a curtsey of greeting, but she'd scarcely begun before Alec caught her elbow with a quick laugh.

"Ye can pick it up later, lad," he said, pulling her upright.

Realizing her error, Merry switched into a hasty, awkward bow and gritted her teeth. She was weary of playing the part of a lad, a part she played poorly.

The expression in Ewan's eyes revealed that he hadn't missed her mistake.

Iona's face appeared as if it were carved of ice. There was no way to know what the woman thought other than the obvious fact that she wasn't particularly pleased to see Merry standing before her.

"Ye must make room for Moridac at your table, cousin," Alec said then. "The lad saved our lives. If not for him, we'd all be hanging in Hairibee now, most likely even Ewan."

"My uncle would never have allowed it," Iona disagreed, marring her perfect features with a frown.

"Make room," Ewan ordered, settling back into his chair to idly twirl the stem of his goblet betwixt his fingers.

"Come." Iona brightened then and pointed to the chair next to hers. "Moridac, sit here by my side and—"

"Nay," Ewan interrupted her curtly and pointed to the already occupied seats by his side. "'Tis best that my men sit here."

Iona's face darkened, but after a few minutes of shuffling, two seats were soon emptied, and Merry found herself with Alec on one side and Ewan on the other.

"Tread softly, *lad*," Alec warned in a murmur, tossing her an orange.

And then a servant brought a silver ewer filled with scented water to clean their fingers, and the feast began. As the musician began to strum the lute in a wandering melody, Iona leaned closer to Ewan and slipped a possessive hand onto his forearm.

He immediately shifted away.

She frowned and, twisting her ring around her finger, pointed to the pheasant. “I would have some of that delightful bird, my lord.”

Ewan remained silent but politely carved a savory slice of meat and set it upon her trencher. As she began to daintily pick at the meat, he speared the pheasant with his dagger once again, and removing the bird’s entire leg, this time dropped it calmly upon Merry’s trencher instead.

Iona made a sound of minor distress as Merry stiffened in alarm. She cast a quick glance at Ewan. ‘Twas unseemly for a man to serve a lad. Hoping no one had noticed, Merry quickly seized the leg and took what she thought to be a manly bite.

Alec chortled from her side.

“I didna know ye to be a fancy-fingered lad,” he said, meeting her quizzical expression with a challenging gleam in his eye. “Ye should eat more like a man. Mayhap ye’d have luck with the lasses then, aye? Allow me to show ye!”

And with that, he wrenched the pheasant’s remaining leg free and bit into it, tearing a large mouthful of meat off in a single bite. As the grease dripped down his chin, he cocked his brow at Merry and nodded. “Your turn, try again,” he said.

Merry scowled in disgust. She finally felt clean for the first time in weeks. But with a glare, she took a large bite and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand like she thought a man would.

It took several attempts to remove all the traces of sauce and grease from her face. And the fact that Alec chortled in outright amusement told her that she hadn’t quite succeeded.

Casting him a look of disapproval, Ewan leaned close to Merry. “Eat however ye please, lad,” he said firmly. “Alec is hardly a man to follow.”

But Alec just laughed and clutched his heart in mock pain. “I’m wounded by your words.”

Strangely uneasy at Ewan’s closeness, Merry reached for her goblet and took a generous mouthful. But she swallowed wrong and began to choke.

At once, both Alec and Ewan clapped her back.

“I’m fine,” she gasped at them both, keenly aware of Iona’s icy gaze locked upon her every move. “Truly,” she assured them, her voice growing stronger by the moment. “I’m a strong lad, aye?”

Alec chuckled a little at that and withdrew, but Ewan’s hand moved up to rest lightly upon her shoulder. He was very close. His thigh was pressed solidly against hers. And with his blue eyes penetrating hers, he slowly lifted his thumb to wipe a bead of wine from the corner of her mouth.

There was no denying the intimacy of the gesture, and Merry froze.

She knew she should move away. She couldn't allow the man's reputation to suffer when all in the castle knew her to be a lad. But it was impossible to wrench herself away. How could she ignore the flutters of delight rippling through her from the mere touch of his skin upon hers?

But then Alec's hand clamped down upon her shoulder, and he pulled her back.

Ewan's hand fell away.

"Would ye care for a wee bit more to drink, lad?" Alec asked, thrusting her goblet back into her hand.

Merry closed her eyes. Why couldn't she remember that Ewan was a betrothed man? How could she allow herself such feelings?

She suddenly wanted to be away. Far away.

"I've never cared for this place," Alec was saying as he cast an eye about the gloomy hall. "Some say the specter of the wicked Baron de Soulis wanders here."

Grateful for the distraction, Merry cleared her throat and asked, "Wicked? And why was he so named?"

At her side, Ewan remained silent. She didn't want to look at him. She could only imagine how angry Iona must be.

"Some say he ate the bairns of the village," Alec continued lightly. "I dinna know if he truly ate them, but he was boiled in lead for some such cause. Boiled in a cauldron at the ancient stone circle, Nine Stane Rig, not far from here—"

"Oh, dinna speak of such things," Iona interrupted.

And then Merry had no choice but to look in the woman's direction.

She'd been wrong. Iona wasn't angry.

She was furious.

With her blue eyes locked upon Merry's she leaned close and brushed her breasts along Ewan's arm. "But I have nothing to fear," she almost hissed. "I have a strong warrior to protect me, a man whose name alone brings fear into the eyes of the bravest of men."

At that, Ewan rose abruptly to his feet, and without a word of explanation, quit the hall, disappearing under the darkened arch that led to Lothar's chamber.

"Ye have him, do ye?" Alec asked his cousin in open amusement.

Iona's eyes turned flat and hard as she gave a scornful laugh, and then with fire in her voice, she turned to Merry.

"You're rather homely," she said with a fierce little smile. "'Tis fortunate you're not a lass. There wouldna be a prayer of a husband for ye then, aye?"

There was no doubt in Merry's mind then.
Iona *knew*.

Chapter Nine – Dinna Tease a Dragon, Lass

After checking up on Lothar and finding him safe in the gentle hands of the redheaded maid, Ewan retreated to the priest's chamber in search of parchment and a quill. The holy man received him cordially, inviting him inside with a sweep of his aged hand and then guiding him toward a table littered with a variety of parchment, inkpots, and quills.

Sitting carefully to lessen the pain in his side, Ewan selected two sheets.

He must write two letters: one informing Iona's father that there would be no union between the MacLean and Hepburn clans. The other would be sent to Ruan MacLeod, to let him know that Merry was safe in his care.

Spreading the parchment upon the table, he dipped his quill into the clay inkpot and hurriedly scratched the first missive. Just as quickly, it was sealed.

And then pulling the second parchment onto the table, he smoothed his hand across it and addressed his longtime friend, Ruan MacLeod.

The quill tip scratched loudly across the paper in the silence of the chamber as he wrote the words explaining how Merry had saved their lives.

He paused then and smiled at the memory of their first meeting.

In his mind's eye, he could clearly see the raven-haired lad standing outside his cell, holding the keys to set them free. Even then, her large brown eyes had sparkled with spirit.

Blinking a little, he focused his attention and, returning to his letter, described how valiant a lass he'd discovered her to be. Aye, she'd evaded the English soldiers through strength and cunning.

Again, his mouth quirked into a smile, a smile that made him realize he'd been smiling quite oft of late, something he'd thought never to do again.

Aye, it was because of Merry. Among many things, she'd helped him to remember how to smile. She'd done more than that though. In her presence, he felt more alive than he'd felt in a good long while. Alive in many ways.

The vein on his temple began to pulse.

Slowly, Ewan laid the quill down and absently ran a hand over his jaw.

He'd almost kissed her at the feast. And he would have, had not Alec pulled her back out of his grasp. The bead of wine upon her lips had beckoned him to taste them again in a slow, lingering kiss.

He arched a brow, surprised to find his heart was no longer empty. Instead, it was filled with a raw, aching need. Aye, a deep hunger that Merry alone could satisfy.

It was startling and yet felt so right.

He hadn't been looking to fill his bed, but he knew now that he would. There was no denying the desire kindling deep within his soul, the desire for a bold lass with deliciously enchanting curves. A lass with succulent lips that he would claim deeply and make them his and his alone.

Aye, she'd done more than make him smile again.

Never had a lass enthralled him so. She not only held the power to make him breathless with a mere glance, but he also admired her courage, heart, and spirit.

And she made his blood boil.

He could not lose her. He *would* not lose her. At the mere thought of it, he was undone. He would see her lips swollen with his kisses; hear her scream his name in the throes of passion. Again and again. And she would belong to him and no other man.

Picking up the quill, he made his mind up at once.

In bold strokes, he informed Ruan that Merry was safe in his care, and that she was likely to stay there for the remainder of her days if he could win her heart as thoroughly as she'd won his.

He blew softly on the wet ink, reading what he'd written. Briefly, he wondered if Ruan would find him an acceptable suitor for his sister's hand. And then, with a resolute nod, he sealed the letter.

Rising to his feet, he handed both missives to the priest who had kindly offered to dispatch them, and with the greatest of haste.

Then, with the man's permission, he lowered his aching body down upon the narrow cot under the window and closed his eyes, intending to rest just for a moment.

* * *

As the servants circled the hall, adding fresh rushes to cover the wine and other spills, Merry pushed her trencher away, unable to eat one more bite. There was no reason to stay. Ewan hadn't returned, and she was weary of Iona's venomous company.

Raking her chair back from the table, Merry stood up, made a slight bow, and announced, "I'll be off—"

Iona's hard eyes fastened upon her at once. "I insist ye stay," the woman interjected with open hostility.

"Dinna allow the beastie to torment ye, lad," Alec advised Merry with a bored yawn. Rising to stand at her side, he leaned over Merry's shoulder to level a stare at his cousin. "'Tis not as if ye are the Queen of Scotland, aye?"

Merry tossed him a warning scowl. There was no need to make

Iona an outright enemy. But then a quick glance at the anger simmering within the woman's eyes announced it was probably a wee bit too late for that already.

Iona's nostrils flared. But with a false, placating smile, she replied acidly, "Forgive me, I truly meant no disrespect."

No apology could have been more insincere.

Alec rolled his eyes. "Ye have an uncommonly sharp tongue, cousin, and ye'd best soften it or ye'll be left with no choice other than to take the holy vows."

She greeted this with a harsh intake of breath and a haughty, frigid glare.

Shaking his head, Alec helped himself to a generous handful of almonds. Then, taking Merry by the hand, he left the table, pulling her after him and leaving Iona sitting alone, fuming silently.

Once out of the hall, Alec released Merry but beckoned her to follow him. Walking swiftly down a dark corridor, he mounted the narrow steps that led to the ramparts outside.

The sun was bright overhead, but clouds threatened in the distance. The breeze that greeted them warned another storm was on its way.

Shading her eyes to admire the vast view spreading out before her, Merry took a deep breath of the fresh air and sighed.

"We shall be leaving soon, ye think?" she asked softly. "Mayhap on the morrow?" She didn't even attempt to hide the pronounced wistfulness in her tone.

Alec didn't respond at first. He simply stared straight ahead as if unseeing. Finally, he answered, "We'll stay here at least a week, if not more."

"A *week*?" Merry's eyes widened in alarm. How could she bear an entire week of Iona fawning over Ewan? "Why?"

"Ewan's still hu …" he began easily enough but paused and checked himself mid-word. With his green eyes still fixed upon the distant moorlands, he said, "There's word that Ewan must wait for."

Merry scowled and turned away, a leaden feeling weighing her heart. Aye, she recalled quite well that very morning Iona had informed Ewan that her father would arrive soon.

Marriage matters.

Well, Ewan had to wait to discuss them, but that was scarcely reason for *her* to stay. In fact, it was all the more reason for her to *leave*. And Ruan was probably mourning her by now.

But then Alec's strong fingers caught her chin in his hand. Forcing her eyes to meet his, he advised with a charming, lopsided grin, "Mind ye, ye canna let the harridan nettle ye so. Take this time to rest, aye? Ye look like ye could stand to eat a few more meals afore we ride

again."

He moved his fingers, letting his thumb trail the line of her jaw before dropping his hand.

The gesture made her pause. He was standing close, mayhap a wee bit too close. But that didn't necessarily mean he meant it all in an intimate way.

Shrugging her imagination aside, Merry gave a tired laugh. "Ye speak words of wisdom, Alec," she said, rubbing her neck. "I'll not deny that this past month has been a taxing one."

He winked and gave her his characteristic smile. "I'm always happy to lend an ear, lass. Ye look as if your lips have words to say."

"Nay, not truly, I suppose …" She trailed off slowly.

They stood in a companionable silence, staring at the moors and gentle hills spreading out before them.

A strong wave of longing rolled over Merry.

She missed Skye.

"I suppose I'm pining just a wee bit for home," she admitted in a soft whisper, surprising herself at speaking it aloud. But then, Alec's presence had a comforting effect upon her, a relaxing one. So, she let the words tumble out. "I would see the mists creeping up from the bogs, and the burns flowing down to the sea. Aye, and I miss the perfume of bog myrtle, and riding Diabhul on the yellow coral beaches. I even miss the wailing cries of the gulls surfing the winds over the Maidens…" Her throat swelled with yearning, and she couldn't speak.

Alec stood close. She could feel his eyes upon her. And then, he noted quietly, "Skye. You're from Skye."

His voice held a husky note, and Merry glanced up sharply.

There was no denying it. His green eyes looked down upon her with desire.

Strangely, she didn't move back.

Their eyes caught and held and then, lowering his head, he murmured into her ear, "Tell me, what is your name?"

She could feel his warm breath on her cheek. Shaking her head, she took a step back. "Nay, Alec."

She wasn't really sure if she meant "nay" to his request or rather to ward off the ardent intention he seemed to have.

Maybe both. Maybe not.

"Why are ye so loath to reveal your name?" he asked, turning his back to the stones to lean upon them and fold his arms.

She hesitated. Why, indeed?

At first, it had been because of Ewan. But now, she just wanted to ride home to Skye, to forget her adventure altogether. She wanted to forget all of them. She wanted to simply walk away.

And then mayhap she could forget the pain as well, the pain of knowing that Ewan would soon spend his days in the arms of another woman.

"Can ye not tell me?" Alec interrupted her thoughts in a gentle tone.

She averted her gaze and swallowed. "I dinna want ye to find me, Alec," she answered truthfully. "I dinna want to remember any of this. I canna stay here, not anymore." She clenched her jaw, refusing to let tears fall.

A long silence stretched between them.

Finally, Alec cleared his throat. "I dinna see how Ewan will carry through with it, lass," he said in a low voice. "Have ye told him how ye feel?"

Tell him? Tell him that she'd fallen under the spell of love?

Astonished and a bit ashamed, she scowled up at Alec. "There's naught to say, Alec Montgomery. He'll be a married man soon enough. And whatever 'tis ye think ye know, keep that tongue of yours behind your teeth!"

At that, he flashed a wide grin.

And then she moved as if to leave, but he caught her by the shoulders and twirled her around to face him.

"Ewan's not the only man to walk the Earth," he said in a light tone. "Some say that I'm a braw man in my own right." His green eyes twinkled a little.

Merry held still.

It was true. Alec had his own appeal, and it was plain to see just how he could captivate a woman so. He *was* a handsome man with eyes the color of emeralds and the hint of a cleft on his chin. Moreover, he was a brave man, with a warm and humorous nature. There was no doubt that he could make many a lass giddy with desire.

Mayhap even herself, if she hadn't met Ewan first.

She placed a hand on his chest, intending to push him away, but he seized her fingers and held them tightly, obviously reluctant to release them.

"Alec, ye do have a way of creeping into a woman's heart," she confessed in a hoarse whisper. "But—"

He silenced her by placing a finger upon her lips. "But," he repeated the word. "I dinna care for that word, lass. Not if that's your way of telling me we dinna suit one another."

"A man like ye is worthy of more—" Merry began.

But he didn't let her finish.

She knew he intended to kiss her, and she knew she was going to let him, simply to see what kissing him would be like.

Would the touch of his lips set her soul on fire?

He pulled her close and, searching her eyes, slowly lowered his mouth to hers.

It was a nice kiss, but it clearly lacked the thrill of desire. There was no rush of heated flame, only a tiny spark at most.

Alec lifted his head and, reading her expression, a look of disappointment crossed his face.

A wave of remorse swept through her. She hadn't wanted to hurt him. Ach, why had she let him kiss her? Especially since deep inside, she'd known all along that the only man she *really* wanted to kiss was Ewan MacLean.

Perplexed and a bit confused with herself, she turned away only to freeze in shock.

Ewan stood tall behind them, his feet planted in a wide stance and his arms crossed over his broad chest. Dark lashes hooded his blue eyes, eyes that skewered Alec's.

He didn't move, save for his blond hair blowing lightly in the breeze.

And then, Merry fled.

With a pounding heart, she ran down the spiraled staircase, criticizing herself aloud, "Do ye lack common sense, ye fool? Ye aren't one to simply run away! Ach, what have ye done? Just what have ye done?"

Reaching the last step, she barreled around the corner, colliding directly into a woman passing by and nearly knocking her over.

A flash of red hair, the scent of lavender, and Merry's heart sank, knowing immediately who it was.

"You're naught but a constant thorn in my side!" Iona's voice shrilled in her ear.

Latching onto Merry's arm with a surprisingly strong grip, Iona yanked her across the corridor and into a nearby chamber. It was empty save for a roughhewn bench under an open window.

There was a hint of a chill draft in the room, but it wasn't the chill that made Merry shiver. It was the look in Iona's eyes.

"Forgive me—" Merry began.

But Iona shushed her with an impatient hand. "Ye be an ungainly lanky lad, Moridac," she said with a thin smile full of malice. "Right plain, ye are!"

Merry watched her with a guarded eye. "Is that all ye have to say to me?" she asked the woman bluntly.

Iona stood there, twisting her slender fingers in agitation. And then, without warning, she reached over and ripped Merry's shirt, tearing it open enough to reveal the bandage covering her breasts.

Merry stared, aghast, and then instinctively lifted her hand and delivered a sharp thwack across Iona's cheek.

Iona gasped, shocked. “Have ye no shame?” Her pitch rose.

“Ach, but I’ve had enough of ye, ye *shrew*!” Merry retorted, slightly rattled as she towered over the woman. “Ye may be a lady, but ye are right lacking in manners!” She gathered the shreds of her torn shirt together, upset and angry.

The day was worsening by the moment.

“Is parading about as a lad some sick fancy of yours?” A shrill note of disdain joined the rage in Iona’s voice. Two spots of color stained her cheeks. “Do ye seek to ensnare Ewan with your beguiling, deceitful ways? Or are ye already his whore? I’ll not have your kind here, under my roof!”

“I’m nothing of the sort!” Merry snapped in reply. “I owed Ewan a debt, and I repaid it. ‘Tis all!”

Iona stared, her breasts rising and falling. And then her eyes swept Merry up and down, haughtily. “Aye, I believe ye. You’re certainly nothing a man of his consequence and stature would want in his bed.”

Merry swallowed, ignoring the warmth traveling up her neck. The comment stung, more than she cared to admit.

Iona’s lips curved in satisfaction. “Aye, ye aren’t much of a woman. Your hair … your skin. Coarse and dull, the both of them.” She smiled, but it was a cold, heartless smile.

“I’ll not stay here to simply listen to ye hurling insults, Iona,” Merry warned in a restrained undertone. “Do ye have aught else of any value to say?”

Iona’s chin trembled with anger and then fumbling in the folds of her gown, she pulled out a small leather bag and tossed it at Merry’s feet.

It landed with the unmistakable clink of coin.

Merry wrinkled her nose in disgust. “And what are ye paying me to do?” she practically growled.

“Leave. At once. I’ll not have it said that Ewan openly feasted in my hall with his lover,” Iona said, surveying her with hatred in her eyes. “Leave afore others discover who ye truly are. Ewan holds a reputation unblemished. I’ll not have ye stain his name.”

Merry’s face registered disbelief, and a bitter laugh escaped her lips. Only moments ago, she’d wanted to leave. Now, she felt quite the opposite.

Stooping, she picked the pouch up and turned it over in her hands. “I have no claim on Ewan,” she said truthfully. “Ye’ve naught to fear from me.” She extended her hand and offered the pouch back.

Iona gave a scornful laugh. “Ye misunderstand greatly,” she hissed contemptuously. “Only a fool would believe Ewan could be tempted by ye. I know *I’ve* nothing to fear from ye. But unfortunately, the land is overrun with fools and they might—”

“Pray, spare yourself the trouble of speaking any more,” Merry interrupted, dropping the pouch back onto the floor. Deciding she was finished with the woman, she added, “I’ll leave now, afore I’m tempted to knock some sense into your head. Dinna think to speak with me again."

And with that, she fumbled with the latch and opened the door.

“A pox on ye!” Iona shouted after her. “I curse the day I first saw your face!”

Rolling her eyes, Merry strode away.

Her anger carried her swiftly out of the castle.

The clouds had thickened since the few short minutes that she’d abandoned the ramparts. A few scattered raindrops fell onto the courtyard stones as she headed toward the stables, and she was scarcely inside before thick drops pelted down from above.

She didn’t mind.

The stables were a far more relaxing place than the castle, by far, and she found the mere scent of horses soothing. Taking little care to hide her foul mood, she stomped toward Diabhul’s stall, but by the time she’d reached it, her anger had begun to abate.

Alec was right. Iona was an ill-tempered beastie. And even though her behavior was venomously hateful, the woman*was* within her rights.

Ewan was—as much as Merry was loath to admit it—her betrothed.

“Ach, I was wrong, I suppose, and I shouldna hold it against the hussy,” she muttered under her breath only to experience a twinge of conscience over naming the woman as such.

Iona was a properly betrothed lady, though a spiteful one. She was far from a hussy.

Pushing Diabhul’s stall open with an exaggerated shove of her hip, Merry stepped inside and rested her head against the stallion’s broad, black face.

“Ach, what’s come over me, Diabhul?” she murmured into his ears. “Am I turning into a harridan myself? How can I blame the woman, aye? His chest of stone just beckoned to be touched … and his eyes would enthrall any lass, aye?”

Diabhul gently nudged her shoulder.

“Ye agree?” Merry asked with a wry grin.

And then Iona’s hateful words echoed in her head. *You’re certainly nothing a man of his consequence and stature would want in his bed.*

Merry’s mood darkened at once.

“And what man would want *ye* in *his* bed?” She snorted, blowing her hair out of her face. Wrinkling her nose in disdain, she lifted her chin and began to prance about the stall, mimicking Iona’s mincing

steps. “Ach, she rightly deserved that slap on the cheek and more besides.”

And then stomping around Diabhul’s large black rump, she drew up short as she came face-to-face with Ewan.

Merry froze in horror.

He lounged against the wall in his white shirt and dark breeches, looking incredibly handsome. His arms were crossed over his broad chest, and there appeared to be a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

“And just whom did ye slap on the cheek, Merry?” he asked in a voice that held a distinct trace of laughter in it.

Merry blinked, flooding with humiliation as she racked her brain, replaying her fit of pique. Just what had she said? Had she spoken loud enough for him to hear?

Ach, just what had he *heard*?

But with her brows drawn in a straight line, she snapped, “Mind your own affairs, Ewan.”

His only response was a raised brow. He merely stood there, studying her face in a way that she couldn’t interpret.

But then she recalled Alec’s kiss and, suddenly ashamed over the entire mess, she cast her eyes down to her feet.

“Ach, I’m a mean-spirited lass,” she confessed, heaving a loud sigh. “Aye, I let Alec kiss me. And I slapped Iona, and I’m sorry for it.” That wasn’t quite truthful, so she added, “A wee bit sorry. Someday, I hope to be as contrite as I should be.”

“For slapping Iona?” he asked, and then his voice deepened. “Or for kissing Alec?”

She glanced up at him sharply.

His keen blue eyes impaled hers, and there was little light-hearted about him now.

She swallowed. The last thing she wanted to discuss with him was love and desire. Nay, not with Ewan. ‘Twas too painful. Not when she craved the touch of his hand.

“And why are ye lurking about here at this hour?” she asked instead, deliberately steering the subject away from kisses.

His eyes bored into hers for several long moments, almost as if he were reading her soul, but then his mood appeared to lighten once again, and he nodded toward the black stallion snuffling through the straw on the floor in search of bits of hay.

“I knew ye’d come to Diabhul soon enough,” Ewan answered, cocking a brow at her. “And I sought to make peace with the princess while I waited to speak with ye.”

Merry swallowed. The soft burr of his voice made her shiver. A little rattled, she repeated, “Princess?” Ach, why had she asked? She knew full well he meant the horse. Why was she suddenly so nervous?

He sent her a calm smile and then nodded at the stallion with a mischievous glint in his eye. Addressed the beast in a teasing tone, he asked, “And how do ye fare this day, Princess? Have ye dined well?”

Shoving himself from the wall, he stretched and flexed his arms.

Merry lowered her lashes, watching his muscles ripple as he extended his hand toward the stallion’s head.

Diabhul lifted his head and twitched his ears his direction. And then without warning, lunged to nip him, but Ewan was too quick and easily sidestepped the beast in one lithe step.

“Aye, my lady,” his voice rumbled even deeper. “But soon enough, ye’ll let me ride ye again.” He turned then and looked straight down into Merry’s eyes.

He was standing only inches away, and his very nearness made her dizzy.

All at once, the stall seemed disturbingly intimate and uncomfortably warm.

Ewan was a large and formidable man, towering over her and radiating a deep strength. Suddenly, a wave of desire danced over her, revealing that her feelings for him had, if anything, only intensified.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to remind herself that he was a betrothed man.

Disgusted with herself, she turned away.

But his strong hands seized her by the shoulders and spun her around.

For a moment, she lost her balance and fell against him. Again, she could only note that the sheer size of him was intimidating in the most delightful way, as was the hard, chiseled contours of his chest under her palms.

But righting herself, she drew back. Or would have, had his strong fingers not locked upon her shoulders.

“Do ye harbor hopes in Alec’s direction?” he asked directly, his piercing eyes searching hers.

Merry drew a strident breath, struggling to combat the temptation of his nearness. Clearing her throat, she answered, “The only hope I harbor is to leave this place and go home, Ewan. I wish to be as far away from this place as I can. And from ye, too.”

She tried to wrench her shoulders free, but he would not let her go.

“Do ye love him, Merry?” he asked gently.

She could only stare at him. How could he ask her that? Did he truly not know how she felt? And what good was that, anyway, when he was promised to another woman?

Clenching her jaw, she countered with poor grace, “And what right do ye have to ask of me whom I love?”

They stood there in the stall, silent, until she found his nearness and the heat of his skin simply too much to bear. Aye, there was no doubt where her heart truly lay and wanting to touch him only got worse with each passing moment.

Twisting her shoulder, she abruptly broke free of his grip and whirled away. “I want to go home,” she said. “Mayhap, I should ride onward to Stirling. Ruan’s bound to be truly fretting.”

He closed the distance between them with a single stride and caught her firmly from behind, encircling her waist with his arm.

Merry snapped her mouth shut. It was impossible to concentrate with her back pressed against his hard chest. She could feel every inch of him.

“I’ve sent him word,” he said then, his hot breath against her cheek sending shivers down her spine. “I’ve told him that I’ll be keeping ye in my care.”

Her brows yanked up, and her eyes flashed. “Have ye now? And what gives ye the right?” she asked, trying to break free, but his arm was impossible to budge.

She gave his arm a few half-hearted slaps out of pure principle, but each slap lessened as she became aware of just how warm his skin was beneath her fingers. And by the fourth attempt, she simply gave into her impulses and trailed a finger along the veins flowing over the muscles in his arms.

He tensed then. She knew she should stop tracing her finger over his skin, but she didn’t. Yearning flooded through her, a longing so intense that she didn’t care what he thought of her anymore.

She wanted to touch and kiss him with every fiber of her being. And closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and melted against him, intending to savor the moment as long as she could before he got the chance to politely step away and inform her that he was soon to be a married man.

But instead, he pulled her even closer, and both of his arms snaked around her waist to lock her against him. Burying his face in her hair, he whispered, “Dinna tease a dragon, lass.”

For a moment, his lips brushed her neck, scorching her flesh and sending her senses into turmoil. With her breath coming in short little gasps, she repeated, “A dragon?”

“Aye,” he answered with a ragged edge to his voice. “I’m telling ye ‘tis dangerous to tease a grown man.”

Merry swallowed. It was hopeless now to resist the wave of passion sweeping through her. She simply stood in the circle of his arms, scarcely breathing.

And then in a voice as soft as a caress, he whispered into her ear, “Aye, I would know whose chest of stone and eyes enthrall the lass.

And which man would ye want in your bed? Is it Alec or … me?”

"Alec?" Merry burst out in astonishment.

Placing her hands upon Ewan's, she attempted to pry his apart, but he released them only enough to spin her in his arms. He needed to see her face.

The shocked and slightly outraged expression in her brown eyes gave him hope.

"Tell me where Alec lives in your heart," he whispered, his eyes burning into hers. "I havena the patience of a saint, Merry, nor is my heart made of ice."

On the ramparts, Alec hadn't offered a word of explanation. He'd merely turned upon his heel and strode away. Ewan had been too sick at heart, and simply too weary to follow. His wound burned more than it should. He'd soon be lying in bed with a fever if he didn't rest soon.

Merry's expressive brown eyes had softened a little. "Alec's a pleasant lad," she answered with a shrug. "But that's the end of it. Aye, I wouldna want him in …" Her voice trailed away, and she quickly averted her gaze as she realized what completing that sentence would imply.

He lowered his lashes then, and his blood began to sing in his veins. Spanning his hands about her waist, he growled softly, "Then you're too far away, lass." Aye, even an inch was suddenly too far. "Come a little closer," he demanded.

Her eyes widened, and her soft full lips parted in surprise as he crushed her close.

She didn't resist, in fact, she melted against him. Her shirt had been ripped, revealing the long graceful curve of her neck and the strips of cloth binding her chest. He caught his breath as long-forgotten feelings of passion ignited deep in his soul. A longing of sweet torment washed over him as he ran a hand up her back and pushed her even closer until he could feel the softness of her breasts mold into his chest.

And then she tilted her head back and running the back of her hand down his arm, willingly offered him her lips, ripe lips that would drive him to the edge of madness if he did not immediately taste them.

Any shred of control he had thought to retain was immediately lost.

No longer thinking or caring to wait for Ruan's blessing, Ewan whispered a warning. "Keep your wits about ye, lass, if ye can."

"Wits? What do ye think—" she began.

But a savage growl erupted from deep within his throat, and he interrupted her with a swift, hard kiss.

It was a kiss of passion, a bold assertive kiss that commanded full surrender.

She gasped, and he unrepentantly took advantage of her surprise to run his tongue across her teeth. Aye, her lips were soft and yielding beneath his, and as deliciously intoxicating as he knew they would be. He savored the surge of sensation, his want deepening with each passing moment.

And then she pulled her lips away, enough to breathlessly whisper, "Ewan, we … I …"

He tried to listen, but 'twas nigh impossible. Especially when her softness melded against him in every imaginable way. He waited a moment, watching her struggle for words before he could resist no longer.

"I'm not finished with ye yet," he murmured, gruff and thick-tongued. "Ye can speak later, aye?"

Her eyes turned liquid and nodding, she bit her bottom lip, and he was hard-pressed then to restrain the desire rushing through his veins like molten lava.

Dropping his head, he nuzzled the side of her neck, leaving a trail of kisses up the graceful curve of her neck before his mouth returned to demand more of hers. And this time, he took her lips in a slow, gentle plundering of the mouth both at once tender and assertive. For a time, he continued a slow sweep of his tongue until she collapsed against him.

He smiled into her mouth.

But then, dimly, he grew aware of shouting in the courtyard outside, and it took him longer than was his wont to recognize his own name.

The door to the stables crashed back, and the voice shouted again, "Ewan!"

It was Alec.

Merry tried to pull away, but Ewan held her fast, long enough to trace her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue, and then with a ragged groan, he tore his lips from hers and peered over Diabhul's strong back.

Alec strode their way with large, forceful steps.

Ewan arched a curious brow.

And then Merry stepped back a little unsteadily, and he eyed her kiss-swollen lips with a mixture of pride and possessiveness.

But then Alec was there, his keen eyes taking in every detail.

A charged silence followed, one in which Merry kept her eyes locked straight ahead.

Finally, Ewan broke it with a crisp query. “Tidings?”

“Aye.” Alec nodded, marshaling his expression with apparently little difficulty. Only the twitching muscle on his jaw betrayed his discomfort at finding them together. “A missive bearing the king’s seal and addressed to ye, Ewan. The messenger awaits ye in the hall.”

Alarmed, Ewan lifted a brow. It boded ill. The king had little cause to write to him.

Sending a hurried half-bow Merry’s way, he pushed past Alec and exited the stables. Quickly, and with Alec at his heels, he strode across the courtyard through the rain and the darkening day to duck inside the castle. Stomping the rain from their boots, the two men made their way into the hall.

It was vacant, save Iona and the messenger, both waiting at the high table in the gathering gloom. The messenger was an older man in the Stewart plaid. A broad leather belt encircled his waist, and in his hands he held a rolled parchment with the king’s red wax seal.

Behind him, Iona hovered in a tightly fitting green dress. She eyed the missive with open curiosity.

As Ewan approached, the messenger bowed. “I will await your reply, my lord,” he said, and then turning on his heel, he disappeared from the hall in the direction of the kitchens.

Immediately breaking the seal, Ewan quickly scanned the words.

His brows rose in surprise.

Ach, he could scarce believe what he read. Cunningham. Alec had been right. Hugh Cunningham was a treacherous viper.

Furious, Ewan tossed the parchment onto the table and, planting his hands upon his lean hips, thundered, “Fires of Hell, but that man is a rutting, crook-pated, swag-bellied—”

But then a movement near the door caught his attention, and spying Merry, he choked, checking his rage with great difficulty.

Alec followed his line of sight and after beckoning for her to join them, turned back to Ewan with a wry smile. “The lad’s heard worse, I’m sure, Ewan,” he said, inclining his head at the direction of the missive. “I gather the tidings are …?”

But before Ewan could reply, Iona chose that moment to interrupt in arch tones. “I might remind you there *is* a *lady*present,” she stressed, the tips of her ears pink with outrage.

Surprised he had forgotten her presence entirely, Ewan nodded a belated apology.

And then Merry stepped up to the table, and Iona swung around, startled and angry to find her there. But noticing Ewan’s gaze directed her way, Iona quickly replaced the crease between her brows with a coy smile.

Their differences struck him then. Iona was a cold, icy beauty. She

was nothing compared to the tall, raven-haired lass whose brown eyes were a tempest of temptation and who could bewitch him with a single smile.

Aye, he wouldn't wait for Iona's father to tell her. He'd inform the lass himself that there would be no wedding. He was weary of her games.

He glanced back at Merry perched on the edge of the table, lightly chewing her bottom lip. He couldn't resist. He allowed his eyes to boldly journey down the length of her before he became aware he was openly ogling.

Quickly, he averted his gaze.

But Iona didn't miss it.

Neither did Alec. Slapping his hand upon the table, Alec's expression vacillated between amusement, irritation, and impatience as he demanded, "Tell me the tidings, Ewan! Do ye enjoy tormenting a man?"

Thinning his lips, Ewan focused his attention on Alec once again. And then in a low, stern voice, he cautioned, "I'll tell ye, Alec, but first swear ye'll not be riding off without my expressed command, aye?"

A look of dismay washed over Alec's face. "Then the tidings must be of the worst kind," he said.

"Aye, but I'll have your word first," Ewan insisted.

Alec was a passionate man, one given to acting before thinking, but he was a man of his word. It took him a moment to agree, protesting under his breath, "Aye, but I'm sure I'll regret it."

Ewan nodded grimly. "Yester eve, Hugh Cunningham happened upon the king campaigning for supporters near Selkirk."

Alec tensed at once, clenching his fists.

Keeping an eye on him, Ewan continued, unable to hide the hint of anger in his voice, "And he demands justice from the king for his men unfairly slaughtered in the woodlands."

"Are ye speaking of Hugh Cunningham, the same man who has sworn to fight for the prince *against* the king?" Alec asked in a low voice laced with disbelief.

They exchanged a long look.

And then Ewan said, "I canna say where Cunningham's loyalties lie now. The king is a fool for listening to him. 'Tis time for the prince to take the throne. We've suffered long enough from a monarch who canna see men use him for their own designs."

Alec measured him with a grim eye, and then said, "And I notice ye are careful not to say who Cunningham claims slaughtered his men."

Ewan heaved a sigh, but he didn't stop Alec from snagging the parchment from his hand.

“Sweet Mary!” Alec swore, his eyebrows shooting up to his hairline. “’Tis rubbing salt in the wounds. He claims *I* slew his men unprovoked? I’ll throttle the man with my bare hands this very night —”

“Ye swore to abide by my command,” Ewan reminded him firmly.

“And ye expect me to just stand by and let matters take their course?” Alec objected with fury in his green eyes. Jabbing a finger at the parchment, he asked, “How will ye explain yourself to the king if ye dinna deliver me to Cunningham to face justice as he’s ordered ye? It will provoke the start of the war!”

Ewan clenched his jaw. “I’ll think of something,” he said.

His head was beginning to pound, and the pain from his wound was now throbbing. Wincing, he gripped the edge of the table and drew in a steadying breath.

And then he felt a soft touch on his arm, and he glanced down, surprised to find Iona at his side.

“Allow me to provide ye refreshment, my lord,” she offered, sliding her hand up his arm.

It was a possessive gesture and one he didn’t welcome. He lifted his hand to pluck hers free, but the movement caused pain to lance across his ribs. Ach, he needed to rest. He glanced down at his shirt, wondering if he’d reopened his wound.

Iona thrust a cup of mulled wine into his face then, and he was tempted to slap it away. Aye, the woman was a mightily vexing one. Instead, he forced himself to accept the wine with a curt nod of thanks and set it on the table untouched, and then casting his eyes in a quick search, he saw that Merry had gone.

But then Alec caught his arm. “Ye’d best visit the priest, Ewan,” he advised, nodding at his shirt.

Ewan glanced down. A small patch of blood had appeared, and it was spreading. With a grim nod, Ewan excused himself and made his way to Lothar’s chamber in search of the holy man.

He’d deal with Iona after.

Then he would find Merry.

And he could only pray that Alec would remain a man of his word.

He took the spiraled steps at a slow pace and, peering into Lothar’s chamber, found the man awake. The redheaded maid sat on a stool by Frank’s side, darning a pair of woolen hose. But upon seeing Ewan, she rose to her feet without a word, and bobbing a quick curtsey, moved to stand by the fire with Lothar’s eyes following her every move.

Ewan smiled down at the man’s gaunt face. He was still pale as death, but he appeared a wee bit stronger.

And ever a man to not waste words, Lothar opened his dry lips and whispered, “I’m useless, Ewan.”

Ewan frowned and shook his head. “Nay, Lothar,” he disagreed in a calm, reassuring tone. “’Tis not a bad thing to give up the sword. Find yourself a lass and come to Mull. There’s land aplenty for ye, and ye’ll see that life is yet worth living.”

Ewan paused then, realizing that they weren’t just empty words of comfort anymore. To return to the Isle of Mull, the place of his birth, and to walk along its shores with his hands entwined with Merry’s seemed not only a life worth living but a life to give everything else up *for*.

He almost missed the man’s next words.

“Would *you* give up the sword?” the Frank asked weakly.

“Aye,” Ewan answered without hesitation. Leaning down, he clasped the man’s shoulder warmly. “And mayhap sooner than ye think, Lothar.”

And then the door opened, and the aged priest stepped inside. “Alec bade me find ye,” he said, pursing his lips as he spied Ewan’s red-stained shirt. “Come, lad, ye should be lying abed.”

After giving Lothar a hasty farewell and a promise to visit again soon, Ewan allowed the priest to guide him down the corridor to another dark wooden door. It opened up to a chamber with herb-strewn rushes upon the floor, a large four-poster bed in the center, and a small tapestry on the wall. A warm fire crackled upon the hearth.

Moving to the bed, Ewan sat down, a little breathless.

“The Lady Iona prepared this room for ye,” the priest informed as he pushed Ewan back onto the pillows. “Ye must stay off your feet, lad, and give this wound a chance to heal. Otherwise, ye’ll burn with a fever for certain.”

Ewan said nothing. He knew the priest was right, but he had no intention of staying in the chamber a moment longer than necessary. Iona would doubtless think it an invitation to join him.

In silence, the priest unwrapped his wound, exposing the jagged cut surrounded by bruised skin. Several stitches had indeed come undone, and leaving the man to his work, Ewan glanced away to stare at the fire, caught in the hypnotic spell of the dancing flames as he let his thoughts wander to Merry.

The simple desire to be near her was an overpowering one.

A smile stole across his lips.

Aye, he wished she lay at his side. Her presence alone made him breathe easier. It was as though a weight had fallen off his chest. Her laughing brown eyes warmed his soul. And the passion in her kiss … he couldn’t let himself think of that now.

Instead, he cleared his mind and listened to the peaceful sound of the rain drilling onto the roof mingling with the occasional crack of the fire.

Exhaustion swept over him.

He closed his eyes, promising himself it would only be for a moment.

* * *

It was dark when Ewan lifted his lashes.

And then he heard a soft footfall and felt a light touch upon his shoulder. Still only half-awake, he smiled and murmured, "Merry?"

There was a harsh intake of breath, and he realized the fingers moving across his chest possessed none of Merry's warm sensuality.

Ewan sat up abruptly.

As he feared, it was Iona.

She stood by the bed, some of her hair woven in an intricate braid and her fingers bedecked with rings. Her red curls spilled over her bare shoulders, and her skin was creamy white in the dim light of the single candle that flickered on the mantle. She wore not even a shift but had wrapped herself only in a plaid, which she'd allowed to slip provocatively low.

Ewan expelled an exasperated breath. Pushing back a woolen blanket that someone had draped over him, he swung his legs from the bed and said flatly, "'Tis unseemly, my lady. Clothe yourself. I'll not be sharing your bed."

She stiffened but quickly hid all trace of displeasure and sent him an inviting smile instead.

"My lord, 'tis not unseemly," she said with a petulant pout before lowering her voice breathlessly. "'Tis what takes place atween a man and a woman—a husband and a wife."

"Aye, a husband and a wife," Ewan answered in exasperation as he hastily dressed. "And ye should save yourself for your husband. I've already informed your father that we'll not wed. There is nothing atween us."

He watched awareness grow in her eyes, and then she stifled a gasp. Moving to the window, she turned her back to him and opened the shutters.

"Truly?" she asked, her voice taking on a hard edge, and then she turned upon him. The displeasure was evident in her eyes as she accused, "No doubt, 'tis because of *her*. Ye stare at her like a besotted fool."

It truly wasn't because of Merry. He'd never intended to wed Iona to begin with, but he wasn't certain if she'd like that explanation any better. Instead, he merely noted, "Then ye know she's a lass."

She stood, steeped in the moonlight pouring through the open

window as it cast the room in shades of blue. “But what of me? Why not wed me?” Tears began pooling in her eyes. “What have I done to turn ye against me, my lord?” she gasped, choking a little.

She moved as if to throw herself into his arms, but he quickly sidestepped her and strode to the door. “Ye should go, my lady.”

But she wasn’t so biddable. She stood in the center of the room, struggling to regain her composure. “Have ye lost your mind altogether?” she asked, choking out a thin laugh.

“Nay, I haven’t,” he said with his hand upon the latch.

She darted forward then and, staying his hand, pressed her back against the door so he could not open it. “Ye should ponder the matter at length,” she said. Her voice took on a wheedling tone. “Dinna make so hasty a decision—”

“There was nothing hasty about it,” he said, peering down at her. “Nay, I only delayed in telling ye it would never happen. For this, I am truly sorry. Forgive me.”

She let her plaid fall to the floor then and desperately ran her hands over his chest.

Annoyance mingled with pity. “Do ye care naught for your reputation or station?” he asked harshly, his voice rough even to his own ears.

And then disengaging himself from her searching hands, he kicked the door open and strode out of the chamber.

“I curse the day I ever heard of you!” her voice followed him, rising in pitch with each word.

He would have to leave Hermitage and right soon.

Moving through the dark corridor, he made his way to the hall. There was little light, but he could barely make out the dim shapes of the servants sleeping upon on the floor. Aggravated with himself for falling asleep in that accursed chamber, he settled back against the wall and crossed his arms.

No doubt Alec had seen Merry safely settled for the night. It would be light soon. With the dawn, he would find them.

Tiredly, he lay his head back. And then a candle appeared in the hall, shuffling his way. He watched as the priest approached to kneel at his side.

“Drink,” he ordered, handing Ewan a wooden cup.

Accepting the cup, Ewan frowned at the noxious brew, and then looked up at the priest. “Alec and the lad, have ye seen them?”

“Aye,” the priest nodded swiftly and pointed down toward the end of the hall. “Asleep, the both of them. Now drink this, lad. ‘Tis for your health.”

With a curt nod, Ewan downed the drink and gagging a little, handed the cup back to the priest and watched him walk away.

He was exhausted, but it threatened to be his usual, sleepless night. Only once, had he slept the entire night through without waking, and that was with Merry at this side. With a smile, he leaned his head back against the wall again, and closing his eyes, thought of Merry as he willed the day to come.

* * *

Ewan opened his eyes from sleep, puzzled.

A shaft of sunlight streamed through the hall window. From the angle of the shadows, it was late morning, almost noon. For a brief moment, his brows collided in confusion and then he recalled the events of the night before.

He sat up, his head throbbing and feeling strangely groggy.

"Can ye hear me, Ewan?" Alec's deep voice sounded by his side.

Squinting, Ewan turned to see Alec kneeling on the hall floor by his side. He'd changed into a white shirt and a fine plaid.

"Finally, you're awake," Alec said with thin lips. "Did ye tell the lass?"

"Tell?" Ewan frowned. He must have been drugged. "What happened?"

"The priest sought to give ye rest. He gave ye a sleeping draught," Alec explained curtly. And then he drew his brows into a line and asked roughly, "Did ye tell the lass that ye are no longer betrothed?"

Ewan's frown deepened. "Aye," he said. Iona had been furious.

Alec appeared downright relieved. "Then 'tis not as I thought," he muttered under his breath. Standing, he passed his hand over his brow as if confused.

Still somewhat groggy, Ewan struggled to his feet. "Aye," he said. "I told her and she wasna pleased. We should leave—"

Alec whirled and seized his shoulders. "Ach, not Iona, ye daft fool! Did ye tell the *lad* that you're no longer betrothed?"

Ewan arched a brow and glanced around the hall. "I'll tell her now," he said mildly, wondering at the cause of Alec's angst.

"Ye dinna *tell* her?" Alec shouted, combing his unruly chestnut hair back with both hands. "Ewan, you're a fool of the highest order when it comes to women. She's gone."

"Gone?" Ewan repeated, alarmed.

Of course. If Merry still thought him betrothed, she would not stay. Not after the way they'd kissed in the stables. Most likely, she'd run to Ruan in Stirling.

Experiencing a jarring sense of loss, he slammed his fist against the wall.

"Ach, but you're a fool," Alec chided softly.

He could only agree. "And I know it," he said grimly. He made his mind up swiftly. "We'll leave Lothar here and ride after her at once."

“And the king’s demand that ye bring me to Edinburgh?” Alec asked through furrowed brows.

Ewan shrugged it off. “We’ll let Cameron settle the matter in Stirling,” he said.

“The Earl of Lennox?” Alec raised a brow, and then flashed an approving grin. “Aye, the man has a silver tongue and should he fail, we can ask his wee wife, the Countess. ‘Tis well known she holds the entire court in the palm of her hand.” But then his mirth subsided, and his face grew serious. “But should ye ride with that wound of yours?”

Ewan growled. “Why even ask? Ye know I will regardless.”

“Aye,” Alec nodded and clasped his shoulder, though he still appeared concerned. “She canna have gone far.”

But Ewan shook his head. “Ye dinna know the lass, Alec.”

They took their leave from the priest. Iona was nowhere to be found. And for that, Ewan was grateful.

A short time later, they were off under the bright sun, galloping for the last time under Hermitage’s forbidding portcullis. Settling into the saddle, he set course, north to Stirling. The impact of the ride jarring his wound, but it was bearable. And he scarcely noticed it. His thoughts preoccupied with Merry. He could not chastise himself enough. Why hadn’t he told her bluntly? He ached to hold her again, close to his chest and bury his face in her hair. He should have thought to tell her the truth.

The day passed in a combination of worry, elation, and frustration. Worry that they would not find Merry and elation whenever they came upon her tracks or a peasant who had seen her fly by upon the back of her black stallion. But frustration inevitably followed when they realized the distance between them seemed only to be growing.

It was late when they finally drew rein, the horses winded and spent. Darkness had settled over the woods.

“We’ll never catch Diabhul,” Ewan grunted, dismounting stiffly.

“Does he have wings on his hooves?” Alec growled.

Ewan leaned against a tree to steady himself before sliding down its trunk and resting his head in his hands.

“How do ye fare?” Alec asked quietly. “Your wound?”

“’Tis manageable,” he replied, and it was, barely. What he needed was a good week’s rest. But he was unlikely to get it anytime soon.

They didn’t speak after that, and the night was spent as Ewan spent his nights for many years—awake, worried, and unwilling to close his eyes lest he be caught in an endless nightmare.

Dawn came, and they set out through the early morning mists once again in hot pursuit. By the time they’d reached a village, the sun had burnt off the haze and they could see the sheep dotting the

hilltops surrounding them.

The man at the alehouse had told them a raven-haired lad on a fine black horse had only just left with the dawn. And after hastily swallowing fish and bannocks and washing it all down with mugs of ale, they were off once more. The bleating of the sheep faded in the distance as they galloped along riverbanks and burns swollen by the recent rains.

But when crossing the boggy ground with care, they found her tracks leading into an inviting glen.

At the entrance, Ewan paused to stand in the stirrups and peer ahead.

"Do ye see her?" Alec asked for the tenth time.

"Nay," Ewan admitted tiredly.

Urging his horse forward, he steered the animal into the glen, which sprinkled with early summer flowers. The road dwindled into little more than a path lined by oaks, and through the leaves, Ewan spied mounds of ancient stones.

He slowed his horse to a walk.

"What is it?" Alec asked, coming up behind him.

"Cairns," Ewan nodded with a frown.

He continued forward but slower.

And then from the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a young woman standing near an aged willow swaying gently in the wind. Her long red hair fell over her shoulders, almost down to her knees, and she wore a green plaid clasped with a Celtic cross.

However, just as quickly as he'd seen her, she was then gone, leaving him wondering if he suffered from battle madness.

Pulling rein sharply, he searched the old willow, but there was no sign of her.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that Alec had fallen behind, and he waited a moment for the man to join him.

"What is it?" Alec asked once he'd arrived.

"'Tis odd," Ewan murmured, shaking his head. "I thought I saw a lass. Red-haired and wearing a green plaid by yonder willow."

Alec raised a brow. "Aye, I thought I saw a lass, too, with hair as red as fire, near the trees, but she wore a blue kirtle. When I looked again, she was gone. Mayhap 'twas a trick of the light."

Ewan raised a brow. "Unlikely," he said.

"Mayhap not," Alec shrugged. "But recently we've both suffered the company of a spiteful redheaded lass, aye?"

Ewan tilted his head speculatively to the side and nodded at the willow. A large stone almost as tall as a lass stood behind it. "It could have been a trick of the sunlight, I suppose," he said thoughtfully. "That stone, 'tis reddish of color, aye?"

“Let’s have a look,” Alec suggested.

But Ewan stayed him with a hand. “We should just ride on. There are too many cairns here, Alec. It doesna bode well to disturb the bones of the dead.”

“I dinna believe in spirits,” Alec grunted. Wheeling his horse’s head, he urged the beast to the willow, and after a moment’s inspection, called out, “Ach, there’s naught here—naught but the stones of some old druid circle.”

Ewan hesitated. Their only chance to catch Merry depended upon speed. They truly had little time to waste. But the fact that they’d both seen a red-haired woman was odd. More than odd.

“God’s Wounds,” he swore under his breath. And turning his horse after Alec, cantered up to the willow.

“I’m curious,” Alec said then, and pointed back to some trees not far away. “Give me a moment, aye? I would see if there’s a stone circle by yon pines.”

He spurred his horse back down the path as Ewan called after him. “Aye, but be quick! I’ve no desire to stay in this place.”

Tiredly, Ewan took the opportunity to dismount and stretch his legs.

He was not a superstitious man, but he felt uneasy.

The stones of the ancient circle had mostly fallen around the willow, only one stood erect. And he was about to turn away from it when he saw them.

A fresh hoof print. A large one. And another. And yet another leading into the forest.

With his hand upon his sword hilt, he moved forward cautiously, stepping through the brambles and thickets to scan the damp ground before him. He’d scarcely gone a stone’s throw before he heard the snuffling of a horse and, stepping around the trunk of a twisted tree, came face-to-face with Diabhul.

He almost laughed aloud, and he would have, had not Diabhul lunged for him.

He’d just narrowly avoided the horse’s teeth, when he heard footsteps approaching, tramping noisily through the clumps of fern and bracken.

It was Merry.

Taking refuge behind the twisted trunk, he waited until she drew abreast of him and then stepping out, banded his arm around her waist and caught her to his chest.

She opened her mouth to scream and her hand arched up to lash out, but he blocked the attack and locked her arms with his.

“And ye've led us on a Merry chase, lass,” he said with a smile.

She relaxed immediately, rolling her eyes at the jest. “Are ye

trying to frighten me to an early death, Ewan?" She scowled. "How did ye find me?"

How indeed? He shook his head. "Fate," he answered. What else could he say?

"Well, ye can let me go now," she said, wriggling a little in his arms.

He found the way her body moved against his quite pleasant and only smiled the more. "Nay, I'll not be letting ye go again," he murmured into her hair. "You're coming with me, lass."

Her spine went rigid, and she lifted her smoldering brown eyes to his. "Staying with ye and your betrothed holds little appeal. Nay, I'll not go."

He suppressed a smile. "Ye'll be coming with me, lass. And I'll drag ye kicking and screaming if I have to," he replied, thinking how it was hard to resist the urge to plunder her lips then and there. Instead, he could only savor the anticipation of the moment their lips would finally meet again.

"Nay, I'll just be wishing ye well on your marriage, Ewan," she was saying. "And I'll be on my way home—"

Lifting his hand, Ewan trailed his finger from her forehead, down her nose, and over her lips to silence them. "I'm not betrothed," he said bluntly. "I never was."

She drew her dark brows into a frown. "Pray tell what ye mean by such words, Ewan MacLean."

With a shrug, he pulled her closer to his chest, noting with a private smile that she wasn't quite as stiff as before.

"'Twas my silence that allowed it to go as far as it did," he confessed then. "My father grew weary of waiting for me to wed and sought to find me a wife. He chose Iona. I dinna object, 'tis true, but I thought to die in battle afore it ever mattered."

Merry held still, and then her brown eyes filled with a mischievous gleam. "Ye didna have to die to escape her, Ewan," she chimed sweetly. "Though I do agree with ye that death would have been preferable to taking her to wife."

He laughed and brushed an errant curl back from her face.

She blinked a little at his touch but continued easily enough. "Ach, she's a devious one," she said. "But does she know ye'll not be wedding her? Or have ye left the wee beastie dreaming you'll be gracing her bed?"

She raised her hands to rest her palms flat on his chest as if preparing to push him away.

"Aye, she knows right well," he answered. He lifted his hand then and ran a thumb along Merry's jaw. The touch of her skin caused a wave of fierce desire to sweep through him, and he let the glint of lust

show in his eyes. “I’d much rather speak of ye, lass. Mayhap, ye should tell me more of this man with the chest of stone, aye?” he lowered his voice and added suggestively, “the one that ye want in your bed?”

“’Tis not what I said,” she hedged, bristling a little.

“It best be what ye say,” he growled even lower. “And I’ll give ye no choice in the matter. I’ll be the only man ye ever have, Merry Macleod.”

Her brown eyes flooded with emotion. “Well, aren’t ye a wee bit arrogant, Ewan? Who says that I want ye?” she asked even as she melted against him. Sliding her hands up his chest, she threaded her fingers through his hair.

He groaned deep in the back of his throat. “I should warn ye, lass, that if ye continue that, you’re in danger of being soundly, nay, ruthlessly kissed.”

He let the words sink in, and when she didn’t stop, he lowered his head. He found her lips, kissing her with a soft tenderness that mirrored the emotions he felt toward her in his heart. But he’d scarcely done more than trace the curve of her lips with his tongue when he thought he heard voices on the breeze.

She moaned in a soft protest when his mouth abruptly left hers. Gently pushing her back, he held a finger to his lips, motioning for silence.

Men.

The clash of steel.

Alarmed, he whirled away and, crashing through the trees, drew his sword as he ran.

A horse bore down upon him, a dark shape of a man crouched low over its neck, and then the horse reared, and Ewan recognized the man’s plaid at once.

“Cunninghams!” he shouted, and then with his eyes widening in alarm, he searched the clearing and called out, “Alec!”

Chapter Eleven – Keen in the Old Ways

Merry ran after Ewan as he dashed back toward the road, and as they emerged from the forest, she saw a man wearing a Cunningham plaid on horseback galloping toward them. Drawing near, the horse raised on its mighty haunches, its front legs pawing the air. But after its hooves crashed down, the rider spurred on, swerving to avoid Ewan and instead making for an ancient druid circle surrounded by pines a short distance ahead.

Ewan whirled upon Merry then, pushing her behind him with a protective arm and shouting for her to stay hidden. And then with a litany of curses escaping his lips, he leapt into the saddle of his waiting horse and took off after the Cunningham.

They hadn't gone far before Ewan unseated the man, and moving forward in a shimmering blur of steel, engaged him in combat.

It was then that Merry saw Alec's sun-burnished head near the ancient druid circle, battling against two men wearing Cunningham plaids. Ignoring Ewan's instructions, she spun on her heel. Intending to retrieve her bow, she'd gone only a few steps when a man sprang out from behind the large stone tilting toward the willow.

He moved forward quickly, and she couldn't make out his face, only that he wore the Cunningham plaid.

In two steps, he'd closed the distance between them, and grabbing her by the throat, he growled in her ear. "We just want the Montgomery, ye young fool. Dinna make this your fight."

Merry's stomach clenched in fear.

But then instinct took over, and jabbing her knee up into his groin, she sent the man sprawling back into the ferns. And as he scrambled to his feet, she bolted in the opposite direction.

It took her several moments to realize that he hadn't followed. She paused only to catch her breath before sprinting back to the road.

Ewan had moved further off, and he had just delivered a deathblow to the horseman when Merry's attacker thundered past on a grey gelding at a wild gallop. But this man also avoided Ewan and instead headed directly to where Alec still fought near the tall standing stones.

Merry's heart froze.

There was blood on Alec's white shirt. His movements were slow, as if his sword were made of lead. He then vanquished one of his foes and swinging his sword suddenly, decapitated the other as she watched.

But then, the impact caused him to step back and stumble.

Time slowed as Merry watched him fall.

It seemed an eternity before his head struck one of the stones standing in the ancient druid circle. Suddenly, he went limp, his sword falling from his grasp. And then Merry's attacker caught up to him. The Cunningham leapt from his horse and lunged toward Alec with his sword raised as Ewan's anguished cry resounded through the glen.

Merry cringed, never wanting to hear such a sound again.

In a voice rampant with despair, anger, and horror, Ewan set off toward Alec at a dead run, but he was too far away. Still, Ewan hefted his sword as he ran and taking aim, launched it at the Cunningham like a javelin.

But it was too late. The Cunningham drove his sword into Alec as he lay stunned upon the grass.

Alec didn't make a sound. Not even when Ewan's sword pierced the Cunningham's back and the man collapsed with a gurgling gasp upon Alec's prone body.

And then Merry discovered that she was running, each step filling her with a pervasive sense of dread. But Ewan arrived first. Tossing the lifeless Cunningham aside as if he weighed no more than a twig, he knelt by Alec, his face registering true alarm.

And then Merry was there, standing at Alec's feet, breathless. Instinctively, Ewan rose as if to shield her from the dreadful sight, but she caught a glimpse of a bloody gash across Alec's abdomen. His shirt and plaid were soaked in blood.

She covered her mouth with both hands.

No man could survive that wound.

Dimly, she was aware of Ewan barking orders. There was strength mixed with the harshness in his voice. Somehow, it enabled her to put aside her horror. At least for the moment.

"Tear that plaid into strips, lass, and do it now!" he was shouting. Both of his hands were pressed against Alec's abdomen, as if he were in some way holding the man together. "Be strong for him, lass. He needs us now."

Merry nodded with a stricken expression.

With shaking hands, she stumbled to the dead Cunningham and unsheathing her dirk, began hacking a length of cloth from his plaid. The man's face yawned open and his glassy eyes stared unseeing toward the sky. Only a few moments ago, he'd been shouting at her.

She swallowed and closed her eyes. She was caught in a nightmare. When would it end?

With a vicious jerk, she ripped the rest of the cloth away and staggered back to Ewan's side to begin tearing the plaid into strips. But her hands were shaking so badly, she could scarcely move her fingers.

“Ewan—” Alec gasped, his teeth chattering in agony.

“By the blood of the saints, be silent, Alec!” Ewan thundered, and then throwing his head back, he let loose a torrent of ragged expletives and pounded his fist into the ground.

“Aye, ‘tis bad,” Alec panted weakly.

“’Tis not just, Alec,” Ewan choked. “I’ll see Cunningham hanged for this, I swear!”

They all could hear the tears in his voice. Merry didn’t have to look to know they were coursing down his cheeks.

And it was then that Merry knew there truly was no hope.

Alec was going to die.

She swallowed, unable to weep and instead struggled with the irrational desire to run. Part of her wanted to dash across the meadow as fast as she could and pretend that nothing had happened.

“Allow me to aid ye,” a soft voice said from behind them then.

Both Merry and Ewan jerked around to discover a young lass peering down at them with a strangely intent gaze.

She was slight. Her hair was a dark auburn shade and her eyes, a striking light blue ringed with dark gray. She held a woven basket tucked under one arm, and when she brushed back a strand of hair from her face she left a smudge of dirt across her delicate cheekbone.

“I am fair knowledgeable in healing,” she said calmly, smoothing her blue woolen kirtle. “I can ease his suffering.”

They were both still startled and didn’t answer, but she ignored them anyway and stepped forward to kneel at Alec’s side.

“I saw ye afore,” he gasped, his eyes locked upon her face.

“Nay,” she disagreed in a steady tone. “I’ve only just arrived.”

He opened his lips as if he would speak again, but she frowned and tapped his nose with a finger.

“Dinna speak,” she said crisply. “Ye need what strength ye have.” Delving into her basket, she drew out a rolled bandage and a leather bag filled with a mixture of cobweb and herbs. “There is no stitching this wound, I fear, but I can ease your pain.”

No one spoke as she heaped the mixture upon the gaping cut and then proceeded to bind it tightly with the bandage.

And then Alec turned his head to lock eyes with Ewan. He smiled weakly. “One look at your face tells me I’ve not long,” he said through white lips.

“What would I know?” Ewan choked again. He looked as though he would have said more but words seemed to fail him. Instead, he bowed his head as his shoulders shook.

Alec grimaced and closed his eyes.

And then the lass patted Alec’s bandage with a nod of satisfaction and, wiping his blood from her hands, looked up at Ewan.

“He hasn’t much time afore the pain becomes unbearable,” she said quietly. “Bring your horses quickly. ‘Tis not wise to remain here, there might be more Cunninghams on the way.”

There was no denying the wisdom of her words.

“We will go to Heather House,” she continued then. “‘Tis not far.”

Ewan drew a long shaking breath, and raising his head, repeated, “Heather House?”

“Aye, ‘tis where the Old Mother lives,” the lass replied. Rising to her feet, she stepped away and beckoned for Ewan and Merry to follow. When she was satisfied Alec could not hear, she murmured, “I canna give ye false hope. Even the Old Mother willna be able to save him, but she can ease the pain of his passing.”

Merry choked.

And then Ewan’s hand squeezed her shoulder in a gesture of strength and comfort. Briefly, she laced her fingers through his, and then with hot tears gathering under her lashes, she silently helped him round up the horses.

As gently as they could, they hefted Alec onto the back of the shortest horse. But even that was enough to make him scream in agony and faint from the pain of it. He would have fallen had not Ewan mounted behind him to hold him in his arms.

“I’ll lead ye,” the auburn-haired lass volunteered once they were settled.

And with the sun hanging low in the sky, she took the reins and led them back along the road, toward the entrance to the glen.

They’d gone but a short way when Ewan nodded his head at the willow a few feet ahead.

“Did I not see ye afore, standing by that tree?” he asked in a curiously hushed tone. “Your red hair, ‘twas about your shoulders and ye wore a green plaid.”

The lass looked up at him in surprise. “Nay, I’d only just arrived when ye saw me,” she answered, puzzled.

Ewan frowned and shook his head. “’Twas over an hour ago,” he insisted. “Ye wore a green plaid with a silver cross. A Celtic cross, it was. Ye stood by the old druid stone there.”

He pointed to the ancient stone standing next to the tree.

The lass glanced uneasily over her shoulder at the willow, and her brows creased into a deep frown. “’Tis a cursed tree,” she said, and then she shrugged and added, “The Old Mother wears a green plaid with such a cross, but it’s been many a year since her hair was as red as mine. Most likely, ‘twas a trick of the light.”

Merry swallowed. Undoubtedly, there was a simple explanation, but she couldn’t suppress a shiver.

Ewan seemed similarly unsettled as he asked, “The Old Mother?”

“Just an old woman. ‘Twas she who sent me to aid you,” the lass said in an almost bitter tone. “Some say she has the ‘second sight’. Some claim she has fairy blood. Still others say she should be burned as a witch from the dreams she suffers.”

Merry drew a deep breath. She’d heard tales of those immersed in the old ways and blessed with “second sight”, but she’d never met one who truly possessed it.

“And ye?” she prompted. “What do ye say of the Old Mother?”

The lass smiled a little as if in private jest but then grew serious. “The Old Mother is a canny sharp-eyed trickster, nothing more. Most likely, she saw the lot of ye ride into the glen. ‘Tis well known in these parts that blood flows whenever a Montgomery and a Cunningham meet.”

“Aye,” Ewan said then, but he sounded more as if he simply desired to switch the subject rather than that he’d been convinced.

At the entrance to the glen, the lass led them off the road and onto a dark, narrow woodland path. The forest was thick and dark there, a place where moonlight could never penetrate.

They walked through ancient pines for a short distance, and then the trees began to thin. Crossing an old bridge, they came to a small mossy clearing with a stone cottage standing at the far edge. Untamed roses spilled over the reed-thatched roof, and a small herb garden with a beehive bordered the wide pavers leading up to the door.

They had just lifted the still-unconscious Alec down from the horse when the cottage door opened, revealing an aged woman with snowy white hair. Leaning upon a walking stick, she stood framed in the light spilling from the dim interior, and indeed, she wore a green plaid about her shoulders, clasped with a silver Celtic cross.

From the expression upon Ewan’s face, Merry could tell he found her appearance as unsettling a sight as she did herself, but then Alec moaned, and suddenly, nothing else was of importance.

“My name is Catriona,” the woman introduced herself as she hobbled forward. “Bring the lad in, will ye? And be quick!”

Gently, they carried him inside and laid him on a small bed next to a warm, crackling fire.

“He’ll need more than cherry bark for the pain,” the wizened woman said as she shuffled to his side. Picking up a homespun plaid, she shook it out and covered him with it carefully before waving at the auburn-haired lass. “Bring me the rosewood box, Sorcha, and then while I tend this one, ye see to the braw lad there, aye?”

She pointed a spidery-veined finger at Ewan.

Merry frowned, puzzled, but then her eyes widened. There was blood on Ewan’s shirt. She’d assumed it had all been Alec’s.

Horrified, she gasped. “Are ye wounded, Ewan? Nay, not ye, too!”

He looked at her tiredly and held out an arm, but whether it was for comfort or a silent appeal for support, she didn't rightly know.

And it really didn't matter.

As he slipped a comforting arm about her shoulder, she slid hers about his waist and guided him to where Sorcha had scraped a small three-legged stool across the floor and had pointed for him to sit down.

"There's no cause to fret, lass," Ewan assured as he sat down with a groan. "'Tis an old wound."

"Old?" Merry repeated with a scowl. "And how old is an old wound to ye, Ewan MacLean?"

"Just a scratch from afore when Lothar was—" he cut his words short with a gasp as Sorcha yanked at his shirt.

"A gentle touch, Sorcha," the old woman admonished from her post at Alec's bed. "Gentle fingers, lass. And bring me the rosewood box." Still focused on Alec, she began to croon softly under her breath and fluffing a limp pillow, placed it under his head.

With a clenched jaw, Sorcha nodded, and assuming a polite smile, she turned her attention back to Ewan. This time, she gingerly poked at the blood-encrusted shirt before finally lifting it free from the wound. An angry-looking cut ran across his lower rib.

"Ye've been hurt this entire time?" Merry asked, feeling all at once helpless and angry.

But he only sent her a tired smile and closed his eyes. His gaunt face was shadowed by several day's growth of whiskers, and he looked so exhausted that she suddenly wasn't angry anymore. She only ached to hold him close in her arms.

She heaved a bitter sigh, wondering if the sadness of the night would ever end.

"Wash it, will ye?" Sorcha asked her then, pressing a warm damp cloth into her hands. "He's reopened his wound, but 'twill be a simple matter to prevent it from festering. I'll make a salt-and-honey poultice."

As Merry dabbed Ewan's wound, Sorcha moved to a nearby worktable cluttered with crocks, baskets, and a large chest with brass fittings. Pulling the large chest closer, she unlocked it with a key and lifted a small box from its depths. With a quick step, she delivered it to Catriona before returning to make the poultice.

At Alec's side, Catriona sprinkled the contents of the rosewood box upon his wound, crooning softly all the while. He moaned softly in response, seeming to find the lull of her voice peaceful, and Merry was grateful he no longer writhed in pain.

Silence fell over the small cottage then, a strangely serene silence, and Merry found her eyes wandering.

Bundles of dried herbs and flowers hung from the rafters. A small wooden cupboard stood under the window. Nearby, a white cat perched with its paws tucked beneath it, moving only the very tip of its tail in a slow, peaceful rhythm. A small table with a leather-bound volume resting upon it stood next to the fireplace.

Sorcha then returned to smear the salt-and-honey mixture upon Ewan's wound and wrap his chest with a clean bandage.

It was then that Merry realized just how young she was. Ach, she was little more than a child, and her blue eyes held a melancholy in them that tugged at the heart.

And then, obviously sensing her, Sorcha lifted her gaze to Merry's.

The lass's eyes were stunning. Three rings of pale blue, not two as she'd originally thought—eyes that seemed far too old for such a young body.

And then Sorcha glanced away.

Tying Ewan's bandage with a secure knot, she rose to her feet. "I'll wash your shirt," she offered, gathering the bloodied cloth in her arms. "There's nettle soup in the cauldron on the hearth and bowls in the cupboard. Ye should eat to gain your strength, the both of ye. Ye'll need it."

And with that, she strode out of the cottage without a backward glance.

As soon as she'd left, the old woman sighed. "Forgive the lass," she said, nodding kindly at them. "She's an angry one. Life has treated her harshly."

"There's naught to forgive," Ewan replied at once, rising slowly to his feet. "There's only much to be grateful for." He nodded his head at Alec.

Almost as if he'd heard Ewan's voice, Alec moaned, but the old woman lay her hand upon his forehead, and he stilled at once. She patted his arm once, and then turned her wrinkled face to Ewan.

"A man born for a nobler fate," she said in a soft, barely audible voice. "He wasna supposed to die this way, I'll warrant."

Merry shivered and swallowed, wondering if the woman truly had the "second sight". And joining Ewan, she slid her fingers through his. He gave them a comforting squeeze.

Then he frowned and glanced at the old woman. "Then was it ye that I saw by the willow, Old Mother? How could it be? Your hair was red even though ye wore the plaid and the cross."

She eyed him up and down. "The willow?" she repeated, but she seemed only surprised. "Nay, lad. My hair has been white many a year, and these old bones canna walk far. I dinna know who ye saw, but it wasna me."

Ewan's brows only deepened into a harsher line. "Then 'tis a

strange … happenstance."

"Happenstance?" The old woman cackled a bit. "The willow ye speak of stands in the stone circle, lad. There is magic still in those old stones, but I am not wise enough to fathom it. I only know that last night, Sorcha woke with fretful dreams of a Montgomery dying in her arms—the same Montgomery she's dreamt of often in her young life. And the same Montgomery who was to walk by her side and give her his clan crest."

Both Ewan and Merry froze.

"But did ye not send her to us?" Ewan asked then.

"Nay," Catriona replied with a frown. "Though many name me the witch, 'tis Sorcha who is truly gifted with the 'second sight'. But, the wee lass is too angry to accept it."

Merry blinked and involuntarily glanced at the door Sorcha had exited.

"Then it was her? At the willow?" Ewan asked, startled.

"The willow?" The old woman shook her head. "Nay, never there. I found her there, abandoned as a wee bairn. She was on death's door, but I saved her and raised her as my own. Nay, she calls the willow cursed and willna step foot near it!"

It was clear that Ewan didn't believe her. Merry wasn't certain she did herself.

But then Alec moaned, and lighting a rush light from the fire, the wizened woman shuffled back to his side.

For a moment, he tossed his head from side-to-side and then fell back into an uneasy slumber.

"Will he wake?" Ewan asked in a hushed tone, moving to the foot of the bed.

Catriona didn't reply.

"Mayhap he will still live?" It took Merry a moment to recognize her own voice. It sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet cottage.

Catriona's sharp eyes found hers, and she shook her head. "Nay, he's already at death's door, lass. He'll not last the hour."

Merry gulped, and then Ewan's large arms circled her from behind. "He's in the hands of God, Merry," he whispered into her hair.

And then as the door opened and Sorcha entered, Alec opened his eyes. "Ewan," he gasped.

Ewan was there at once

"Help me up," Alec said faintly, his breathing shallow.

Ewan sat next to him and slipping a strong arm under his shoulders, carefully eased him into a sitting position.

"Aye," Alec whispered, waxen-faced. "I dinna want to die lying down."

And then Sorcha appeared by his side, holding out a small silver

flask. “Drink,” she murmured. “’Twill ease the pain.”

But, he pushed the flask away and seized her hand. “I saw ye in the wood,” he rasped.

“Nay,” she denied once again, but then added quietly. “But I’ve seen ye often in my dreams, Montgomery.”

“And what did ye see?” he whispered.

“Ye and I walking hand-in-hand. And the Montgomery crest. And then …” she paused a moment, and then added, “Then flames. But I dinna know the meaning of it.”

He stared into her eyes a moment before turning back to Ewan. “My crest, Ewan,” he wheezed, twitching his fingers.

They all watched as Ewan took up Alec’s sporran and tilted the contents out onto the bed. Rifling through the collection, he selected a silver brooch of the crest of the Montgomery clan and pressed it into Alec’s cold fingers.

“Take it,” Alec ordered weakly, turning to the lass. “I canna help but think ‘twas ever yours to begin with.”

Sorcha’s blue eyes widened, and slowly, she took the brooch from his hands.

At the last moment, he caught her fingers in his and stared at their entwined hands for so long that Merry feared he had passed on. But then he whispered, “I dinna fathom your dreams, lass, but my heart tells me ye shouldna fear the flames.”

And then he dropped her hand and turned back to Ewan.

“Ach, Ewan, you’re a daft one,” he said, forming the words with difficulty. “Ye’ll take care of the lad, I know it.”

“Aye,” Ewan nodded, his eyes damp and red-rimmed. “Forgive me. I should have seen them coming—”

“Nay, ‘twas never your fault … I dinna wish to waste my … life’s breath arguing with ye,” he said between short gasps. “Dinna let me see … ye again until you’re old … and gray, aye?”

Ewan bowed his head and began to weep.

Merry choked.

Alec heard the sound and gave her a weak smile. “Dinna shed a tear for me, lad,” he said in a voice so soft that she could hardly hear it. And then he attempted to grin. “Will ye … tell me your name now?”

She fell to her knees and grasped his cold hands between hers. “Merry,” she gasped through her tears. “Merry MacLeod.”

“MacLeod,” he repeated, holding tightly onto her hands. “Merry. Your name … will be the last upon my lips. Merry. Aye, ‘tis as soft … as sunbeams in the spring. I love ye, lass.”

His hand was cold and clammy, and then Merry could not hold the tears back. They flowed down her cheeks like a river.

“I love ye, too, Alec,” she gulped.

It was the truth. Aye, she didn’t love him like Ewan, but she did love him all the same.

Again, he tried to smile, but the effort was far too taxing. And then his pale face lost even more color and turned gray as the death rattle settled upon him. It wasn’t long before his eyes dimmed and then shut.

And then, with one last gasp, his chest stilled.

Merry silently wept, and Ewan’s head sank against his chest.

They remained where they were for a time, and then Ewan carefully eased Alec back onto the pillows. And then drawing up the plaid, he covered Alec’s head.

“’Tis been a grim day,” he whispered hoarsely.

Kissing his own fingers, he then laid them briefly on the shroud covering Alec’s head. And then drawing a small leather money pouch from his own sporran, he presented it to the old woman.

“Coins for his eyes and to pay the monks to accompany his earthly body home,” he said. “What’s leftover is yours for your aid, kind lady.”

She eyed the pouch and then took it from his hand. “What’s in here belongs to Sorcha, not me,” she said, and then she turned a sharp eye on him. “His death is not your fault, lad. A man’s fate is his own.”

Ewan nodded grimly.

And then Merry crossed herself with a trembling hand, unable to tear her eyes from Alec’s shrouded body until Ewan gently pulled her away, gathering her close in the circle of his arms.

She stayed there a time, taking comfort in his strong embrace and resting her cheek against his chest, until finally, she remembered he was still injured himself.

“Ye should rest,” she said, lifting her face to meet his.

“Aye, but Alec—” he began, glancing back toward the bed.

“There’s monastery not far from here,” Sorcha said from the fire. “I’ll ride to the monks in the morning. I’m sure there are those able to take him home to his clan. ‘Tis time to take your rest, ye have a wound of your own to heal, aye?”

Ewan nodded, but he didn’t stay inside. Instead, he moved to sit on the stone steps under the roses, and after a moment, Merry joined him. Draping a soft woolen plaid about his shoulders, she sat by his side and leaned her head tiredly against his broad shoulder.

A dim, soft light flickered through the cracks in the doors and shutters, and in the moonlight, she could see long fingers of mist stretching toward the house, giving it an eerie feel.

And then the reality of what had happened struck her.

Alec was dead.

She wouldn't see his lopsided grin again nor experience his pleasantly boyish charm. He was truly gone, and it had happened so quickly.

A sudden pang of guilt jolted through her, and she gasped in horror. "'Tis my fault," she said, her voice breaking with emotion. "Ye both left Carlisle to ride after me."

"Nay," Ewan leaned down to whisper hoarsely in her hair. "The fault is mine. Ye only left Carlisle because of my foolishness."

"Nay," Merry disagreed, but Ewan silenced her by placing a finger upon her lips.

He pulled her head down against his chest then and, swathing the plaid over her shoulders to ward off the chill, settled back with her against the cottage door.

Neither spoke then. There was truly nothing else left to say.

* * *

Ewan woke as dawn painted the sky bright pink, surprised to discover that he had actually slept. Merry lay across his chest. For a time, he simply studied her sleeping face as the sunlight flooded the clearing.

The events of the day before seemed only a dream. Nay, not a dream. A nightmare.

And then he spied Sorcha riding across the clearing on a white highland pony. She was heading into the forest. The lass was an unsettling one. He was inclined to believe she truly was a witch. But she had eased Alec's pain, and for that, he was ever in her debt.

Gently easing himself out from under Merry, he stepped inside the cottage.

The old woman sat by the fire wrapped in a shawl, her wrinkled hands folded over the head of her walking stick. Alec still lay on the bed, shrouded with a plaid.

"Sorcha left for the monastery." Catriona greeted him with a kind smile.

"Aye, I saw the lass." Ewan nodded, and then spying Alec's sporran and sword lying next to the bed, he walked over to trace his fingers along them.

He still couldn't believe that he had to bury Alec. Not after all they'd shared together. He closed his eyes, feeling a wave of sorrow wash over him. He'd buried too many. He was done with it.

It was time to lay his sword down.

But then a ripple of anger coursed through him. Aye, he'd lay his sword down *after* he'd avenged Alec's death.

Once more, he dipped his head in respect and then excused himself to care for the horses.

Sorcha returned a short time later, followed by two friars with an

ox-drawn carriage.

And it seemed as if only a moment had passed before they had settled Alec into the back of the carriage to begin his final journey home. One of the monks led them in prayer, and then crossing herself, Merry placed a garland of wildflowers and heather upon Alec's shrouded body.

And then it was done.

Within minutes, the carriage had disappeared into the forest, leaving Ewan to wonder if it was all just some kind of horrible dream.

The old woman waved them back into Heather House and offered them a humble fare of nettle broth and bannocks. They ate in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. And then rising to take their leave, Ewan and Merry thanked the women for their aid, and soon they were upon their horses, trotting away from the lonely, little cottage.

It was when they'd left the glen some distance behind them that Merry halted Diabhul with a deep scowl marring her brow.

Riding up to her side, Ewan pulled rein. "Aye, lass?" he queried softly.

"Those women," she said, shaking her head. "I canna decide if they were keen in the old ways or if they were mad."

Ewan hesitated.

He'd always believed only in what he could see, but he couldn't help but think something else had occurred in Alec's death.

"Some say if ye live too long alone in the wilderness, madness seizes your soul," he said quietly then. "But I dinna know, Merry. I've been caught in battle-madness, and I've seen many a man die, but Alec's death … 'twas different. For the first time, I wonder if the old ways *do* exist, but I am not a wise enough man to know. I only know for certain that I dinna belong there, in that place named Heather House."

"Aye." She nodded in agreement.

And then he leaned over and cupped her cheek with his hand. "We'll end the sorrow, Merry, I swear it. And I'll take ye home with me to Mull. We'll spend the rest of our days in peace, walking the beaches and listening to the selkies, aye?"

"Aye," she agreed, but her fists were clenched. "After we see Alec's soul at peace. I would have Cunningham pay for his death."

"I'll see Alec avenged," Ewan swore between his teeth as his anger rose to consume him like fire. "Aye, I'll see that Hugh Cunningham pays with his life."

They fell silent after that, and rode, subdued, the remainder of the day.

As dusk settled, they made camp near a cankered, twisted pine perched on the edge of a loch.

The last traces of daylight falling behind the surrounding hills found Ewan sitting by the fire, staring into the flames, lost in thought. Anger and sorrow came in waves, an anger that consumed him and a sorrow that threatened to weigh down his soul. He'd lost too many. He couldn't lose anymore. His soul could no longer bear it, not when he'd finally begun to feel again.

A light touch on his shoulder shook him from his thoughts, and he glanced up into Merry's earnest brown eyes.

Holding his gaze, she knelt before him and rested her hands upon his knees. "I wish I could take your pain away," she said, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

Catching her hand, he brought her fingers to his lips. Heaving a sigh, he whispered, "Ye do, Merry, more than ye can ever know."

And then settling back, he gently tugged her down by his side.

They gave way to a crushing weariness then, and resting his head against a saddle, Ewan didn't let himself think. He just lay there under the sapphire sky with Merry's head resting upon his shoulder.

The night was a peaceful one. The waves lapping the loch shore mingled with the occasional hoot of an owl in a hypnotic way, and gradually, Ewan felt the tension melt from Merry, and her slow breathing signaled she had fallen asleep.

Tapping the hilt of his sword to reassure himself it was within easy reach, he then cradled Merry close to his chest and closed his eyes, promising himself it would only be for a moment.

But it was much more than that. To his surprise, when he opened them again, the rays of the morning sun had just broken over the tops of the surrounding hills. Astonished that he had slept well yet again, he softly kissed Merry's short ebony curls still resting on his shoulder. She still slept, and he felt his heart tug. The lass was fair exhausted. Not wanting to wake her, he lay there in the green ferns, watching the hawks circle lazily and listening to the chorus of the morning birds.

It was such a serene moment in time that he didn't want to move, lest it end.

And then to his utter astonishment, he found himself waking up once more. How could he have fallen back to sleep so easily?

But then, he sensed a shadow crossing his face, blocking the sunlight.

Instantly alert, he kept his eyes closed as his fingers curled around the hilt of his sword. Merry still slept by his side, her hair tickling his cheek, and he felt the weight of her arm resting across his chest.

Ach, he couldn't prevent her from suffering a rude awakening.

But he couldn't wait a moment longer.

With a fierce battle cry, he swiftly unsheathed his sword and arcing it up, leapt to his feet.

Chapter Twelve – A Lass Once Again

There was a resounding clash of metal on metal, and then Ewan recognized the flash of Clan Gray plaid and saw his cousin's laughing gray eyes staring back at him over crossed swords.

"Julian!" Ewan expelled his breath in relief, and dropping his sword, clasped the man into a bear hug.

Julian clapped him warmly on the back and then held him at arm's length to inspect him with a shrewd gaze as Ewan did the same.

Julian hadn't changed much over the years, except perhaps, a few more wrinkles in the face. His jaw was firm, his body lithe, and he still wore his blond hair loose about his shoulders. And, as ever, his lips were quick to shift into a charming smile. Pushing his hair back from his face, Julian shoved his sword back into its scabbard and reached out to draw Merry to her feet from her startled, crouched position.

"Merry, 'tis right pleased I am to see ye again, lass," he said.

"Lord Gray." Merry choked in surprise.

"My apologies for the rough awakening." Julian's gaze swept her from head to toe as a gleam of amusement entered his eye. "I sought to surprise Ewan, but there's little chance of doing that healthily with this fierce warrior. 'Tis fortunate I thought to draw my sword, or else I'd have lost my head, aye?"

"Nay," Ewan disagreed with a slight smile. "Not so fierce a warrior, Julian."

"But ye would have sliced my neck!" his cousin protested, throwing his head back in a laugh. And then his keen eyes shifted between Merry and Ewan a moment before adding, "Ruan will be pleased to see ye, Merry. He was fair concerned to learn ye'd run off."

"Aye," she cleared her throat, still looking a little stunned.

But Ewan lifted a curious brow. "And did Ruan receive my letter?" he asked.

Julian shrugged. "Not when I'd left, but I havena seen the man for almost a sennight. I was on my way to meet Archibald when I saw Diabhul grazing on the moor. 'Tis fortunate he escaped his tether or else I never would have found ye."

At the mention of Diabhul, Merry excused herself and swiftly ran off, and Ewan couldn't resist allowing his eyes a quick appreciative dip over her slim figure as she left.

Julian didn't miss it. With his cheek creasing into a grin, he began to nod slowly. But when he spoke, he only said, "I was on my way down to Carlisle to rescue ye when I'd heard the task was already done."

"Aye," Ewan said with a nod, moving to kick the fire back to life.

He told him then of Merry's brave rescue, Cunningham's betrayal, and Alec's death.

"Hugh Cunningham," Julian repeated the name grimly. "He's riding with the Galwegians to fight for the Prince. I saw him not a day ago. 'Tis like the devil's spawn to play both sides."

"I'll see him hanged for what he did to Alec," Ewan swore.

"Aye, but 'tis really a matter for Cameron, lad," Julian replied with a note of caution. "'Twas at Cunningham's bidding that the Galwegians came to our call."

"Are ye telling me that Alec's death will go unavenged—" Ewan began in an angry tone.

"Nay," Julian interrupted with a mirthless laugh. "Much can happen in the foggy field of battle, aye? I've ridden hard lately and have learnt that the Duke of Montrose has mustered an army sufficient in number to fight the prince. They're on their way now to Stirling with the king. But his force is small compared to ours, if we can engage him afore the northern clans arrive."

Ewan fell silent. War. Another war.

Julian read his expression. "Aye, there is no stopping the king now, I fear," he said quietly.

"And our men?" Ewan asked grimly. "Where are we mustering?"

"Even now the Earl of Angus is bringing the prince's army to Stirling, pressing on from Falkirk to the plain above Torwood Bridge," Julian replied with a tired yawn. "He's not far from here, I'd think."

Ewan scowled.

He'd never cared for Archibald Douglas, the Earl of Angus, Lord of the East March. He cared for him even less after the man had let him rot in Carlisle for a month.

Julian read his face and sent him a commiserative smile.

"Can ye trust him?" Ewan couldn't help but ask. "The man has betrayed us afore. More than once he's brought Englishmen to our land." Aye, he'd fought the man himself at the Battle of Lochmaben not that long ago.

Julian chuckled. "Aye, but remember, the man betrayed James, Ewan. Not Scotland. He's fought to get rid of the king from the beginning, and if there's one thing I trust, it's Archibald on the opposite side of the battlefield from the king."

"I suppose," Ewan grunted reluctantly and then switched subjects. "Are ye coming with me to Stirling? I shall see Merry sent home, but I would see Ruan first."

"Nay, my task is not yet done, lad," his cousin said, clasping him upon the shoulder. "But I'll ride with ye until the crossroads."

A few years ago, he'd been quite surprised to discover that his scandalous cousin had actually created his unsavory reputation to

mask his activities as a spy for Scotland. He gave Julian a nod, grateful that Scotland had such a man fighting for her.

Merry returned then, and Julian shared with them a quick meal of honey-spiced almonds and salted beef.

"And how fares your wife and son?" Merry asked when they'd finished.

Julian's eyes lit with a smile. "I miss them sorely," he replied. "But they'll return home from the continent by midsummer. I can only hope matters have been settled by then, and I can return to Castle Huntly and sleep the day long."

They all laughed then, knowing that Julian would never be satisfied with such a life.

And then as white clouds passed lazily over the sun, they saddled their horses and headed once again toward Stirling.

Less than an hour later, they'd arrived at the crossroads only to hear the sound of jingling bits and the snorts of many approaching horses.

"'Tis Archibald," Julian announced with a grin and waved his hand.

He'd scarcely spoken before a horseback party of men with upright spears rode around the bend in the road. They were led by the sturdy built red-haired, broad-faced Archibald Douglas, the Earl of Angus and Lord of the East March.

Archibald drew his mount up before them. "Well met, MacLean," he greeted him with a broad grin. "Last I heard ye were in Carlisle, in a bit of trouble with that Montgomery."

Ewan drew back as if he'd been slapped. "Alec's dead," he answered curtly.

Archibald blinked in surprise. "Then they hung him that quickly, aye? I thought we had more time."

Ewan clenched his jaw. The man had let them rot in a dungeon for over a month. How much time had he wanted? But he knew there was little to be gained by mentioning it now. Instead, he answered, "Nay, Alec died not even two days ago by the hand of the Cunninghams. 'Twas a cowardly ambush."

"Ach, the Cunninghams?" the earl dismissed with a grunt and tapped his finger impatiently on his saddle horn. "'Tis no small surprise, aye? That feud will never end."

It was a callous reply, but Ewan had really expected nothing more from the man.

"And who's this?" Archibald turned his gaze on Merry. "Your squire?"

Ewan glanced over at Merry. Soon it would be time to put an end to the charade, but not yet. Not when the eyes of many men were

upon her. “Aye,” he nodded once.

Julian’s lips twitched into a smile, but he remained silent.

And then Archibald was inviting them to share a meal, and as his men set up a trestle table of fish, cheese, and good wine, they dismounted.

“We’re en route to join Lords Hailes and Hume,” the earl said, rubbing his hands together as if in anticipation. He then gave a little cackle. “They’ve men from Annandale with them, and ye know how those lads are. They could swing a sword afore they could walk, aye? They’re only happy if they’re on a battlefield.”

Talk turned to war for a time, a subject Ewan was strangely adverse to. Instead, he focused his attention upon Merry sitting cross-legged by his side, and soon he’d lost track of the earl’s conversation entirely until the red-haired man reached over and slapped his knee.

“And ye?” the earl asked. “Will we see ye wed to Iona afore summer’s end, lad?”

At that, Merry’s lip curved into an impish smile, and Ewan merely lifted his brow in response before turning to the earl.

“Nay, I’ll not be wedding Iona,” he replied calmly. “I’ve been bewitched by a bonny high-spirited lass from the Isles whom I’ll be taking to wife as soon as I may.” He caught Merry’s gaze then and held it.

Her large brown eyes twinkled in response.

“I canna believe what my ears have just heard,” Julian said then, bursting into laughter. “Ach, I was suspicious, but I canna believe it. Ewan MacLean in love? I didna know there was a lass to walk the Earth who could melt his heart of stone.” Turning to Merry, his grin broadened as he teased, “Aye, I would fain meet this wondrous woman.”

“Ye will, right soon enough,” Ewan murmured with a cautioning frown. “But I would speak to her brother first.”

“And if he deems ye unsuitable?” Julian chuckled with a curious brow. “Ye know how some Isle men can be when it comes to their wee sisters, lad.”

“Aye,” Merry bantered in a teasing tone. “What would ye do then?”

Ewan met her eyes. Aye, a man could get lost in her mischievous brown eyes. “Mayhap I’d just abduct her,” he said as his lips tugged into a smile.

“I’d advise against that, lad,” Archibald said loudly, draining the contents of his goblet, completely unaware of the undercurrent of their conversation. “There was a time that was a perfectly suitable means, but times are changing a wee bit now. You’ll soon be an earl in your own right, aye? ‘Tis best if there’s no doubt of the sanctity of

your marriage."

Irritated, Ewan rose to his feet. His father was not dead yet.

Growing all at once weary of Archibald's brash ways, he bowed and announced they must continue their journey. Farewells were said all around, and soon enough, both he and Merry once again took to the road at a fast gallop.

They rode hard the entire day, and when the sun set, they were still two hours away from Stirling.

Pausing on the outskirts of a village, Ewan nodded at an inn. "Would ye care to sleep, lass, or ride on?"

"Nay, I've no desire to sleep in a flea-infested bed with three other men," Merry answered with a wry grin.

Ewan lifted a brow, and his gaze fell to her full lips. "Aye, and I wouldna allow such a thing," he said and then frowned. Nay, the only man's bed she'd be sleeping in was his own.

But he'd scarcely thought the words before she'd already urged Diabhul forward.

And then with a gleeful laugh, she called a challenge over her shoulder. "The night is still young, and the moon is bright. I'll see Stirling long afore ye, Ewan!"

He watched as she raced ahead, shaking his head a little and admiring her spirit. He doubted any horse could match stride with Diabhul. He knew for certain that the horse he rode couldn't. But clucking at the beast all the same, he set off after her.

The next few hours were uneventful, and soon enough, the ancient fortress of Stirling Castle appeared before them with the majestic highlands rising behind it. Perched on the rocky outcrop overlooking the town like a hawk, the castle glinted in a moonlight so bright that even at a distance, they could see the blue-shadowed roofs of the town below. The River Forth flowed around the base of the hill, glistening like a silver snake.

Ewan was relieved to see no sign yet of the king's army, and he fervently wished it would stay that way. He had no desire to lift a sword again.

Riding through the belt of trees clustered at the base of the cliffs, they turned their horses' heads to gallop up Castle Hill. The sound of their hooves rang unnaturally loud as they wound their way through Stirling's narrow, cobblestoned streets.

And then they arrived at the castle gate and were admitted at once.

The hour was late, but the governor of the castle, Shaw of Sauchie, was still awake. With a gruff voice, he informed Ewan that Ruan and Cameron were still in Linlithgow but were expected back soon.

Then Ewan made certain Merry was assigned a comfortable chamber before retiring to a room of his own.

It was an inviting place, airy and with white-washed walls and a fine feather mattress. And leaning back upon the bed, he folded an arm over his face, willing himself to fall instantly to sleep. But this night, his sleep was a fitful one. But it wasn't because of the vague nightmares still rippling through his mind.

Nay, it was because he sorely missed Merry by his side.

Dawn came, and he greeted it with his usual sense of relief.

Stepping into the outer chamber, he was pleased to find a hot bath and a fresh saffron-colored shirt with a crisp MacLean plaid draped over a nearby chair, and sinking into the hot refreshing water, he began to scrub the weeks of dirt and grime away.

* * *

Merry rose at the crack of dawn.

She'd learned from a maid that Kate, the Countess of Lennox, currently resided in the castle. It had been awhile since she'd last seen Kate, but the two had shared a warm friendship over the years since they'd screamed together on Skye's shell-covered beaches in the days before Kate had wed Cameron.

Slipping down the stairwell and out into the courtyard, she made her way to the royal apartments.

She was stopped at once by the guards. Finally resorting to bribery, she scribbled a message on a scrap of parchment and slouched against the building's cold stones to wait as one of them delivered it to the countess. Ach, she couldn't really blame the men. She supposed she *did* look the part of a young rascal, but it was irritating all the same.

Fortunately, she did not have to wait long.

She could hear Kate's brusque tone taking the guards to task long before the wee countess herself appeared to envelop Merry in a warm, welcoming hug.

Kate was a dark-haired, lovely woman with sparkling brown eyes and a way of setting all at ease with her quick sense of humor.

"Ye make a right winsome lad, Merry," she said, wrinkling her nose into a laugh as she pulled Merry into the royal apartments. "Ruan's been in a fair dither over where ye were, though he had his suspicions. He sent three men after ye."

"They didna find me," Merry replied. She sighed. There would be no avoiding Ruan's anger when he returned. And then noticing the countess' expanded girth, she gasped. "And are ye with child, Kate?"

Kate laughed again. "Aye, after bearing six wee lassies, I do so want a lad," she answered, patting her protruding belly.

"And what if 'tis another wee lass?" Merry asked in amusement as

they headed down the narrow corridor lined with tapestries.

"Then Cameron would be pleased," Kate answered. Her smile was wry as she rolled her eyes. "He frets so. With a lad, he'd carry the name of Stewart, and as such, Cameron fears there might one day be those who would seek to use him for political gain. Ach, the Stewarts! Always fighting amongst themselves over the throne, aye?"

"Aye," Merry agreed soberly. "'Tis fortunate that Cameron is there to help lessen the fighting, aye?"

Kate nodded. Opening the door to her apartments, she stood aside to let Merry enter. "Cameron's done a fine job of influencing the prince," she said with a hint of pride in her tone. "James will make a fine king, when it comes to that, but now that we're in private, tell me your story, lass! Why are ye parading about as a lad?"

What followed was a lively conversation, one in which Merry recounted her tale, trying at first to share only the happy details.

But when she came to Alec's death, the news subdued the mood at once.

"Hugh Cunningham," Kate repeated the name in a deceptively neutral tone and her sharp brown eyes took on a shrewd cast. "Dinna fear, lass. Justice will find him, of that I have no doubt."

There was something in the way she said it that made Merry pause. Kate was described oft throughout the kingdom as being Scotland's most powerful woman, and in that moment, Merry knew she truly deserved her reputation.

They discussed other things then, mostly relating to Ewan. It was hard to keep from gushing about him, and Kate didn't miss her change of tone whenever she mentioned the man.

The woman was far too perceptive.

"Ach, ye love him!" she said with an infectious laugh. "'Tis in your eyes, Merry, and in your voice."

Laughter escaped Merry's lips. "Aye, I do," she admitted candidly. "And I must confess, I dinna care to be clothed as a lad any longer. I would have him see me in a proper dress and with hair not caked in mud, even though my hair is shorn as if I've had a fever." She pointed to her head with a wry expression.

"Nonsense, ye look exquisitely fetching," Kate insisted brightly before lifting her lip in a suggestive tilt. "And I daresay he must already think so, aye? Ye've travelled quite a ways with each other, haven't ye now? Just the two of ye under the stars at night?"

To her surprise, Merry felt the tips of her ears turn pink. "Nay," she quickly disagreed.

But Kate only laughed. "Aye, I can see Ewan wanting to do things in the proper way, though 'tis abundantly clear the man is a passionate one. I've oft wondered what lass would unlock his heart.

Heaven knows, I've tried to send many his way, but he wouldna open his eyes to even see them. I should have thought of ye sooner, Merry. Now that I think on it, ye are the perfect match for each other."

It took some doing to find a dress to be modified for Merry's height and build. But in the end, they found a soft orange brocade with brown braid. And as three of Kate's best seamstresses busied themselves with the alterations, Merry soaked in lavender-scented water, and for a time, simply enjoyed the sensation of finally being clean.

But she'd no sooner slipped the brocade dress over her shoulders than she began to fret.

Ach, she possessed nothing like Iona's delicate beauty.

"Ye look so bonny," Kate said, clapping her hands in delight. And then she added with a sly grin, "He'll be sweeping ye off your feet and into his bed, Merry, with Ruan's permission or no."

Merry sent her a dry glance and then straightened. "Mayhap I should have stayed dressed as a lad," she said then. "I fear such fine dresses dinna fit me, Kate. But 'tis too late now, I suppose."

"Nonsense," Kate replied briskly, and looping her arms through Merry's, she drew her to the door. "We've missed the midday feast, but I've asked for a meal to be sent to Cameron's privy chamber. Wait for me there, will ye?"

"Aye," Merry agreed easily enough as she stepped through the door.

Moving down the narrow corridor in a soft whisper of silks, she smoothed her hands over the voluminous skirt. After living in breeches and binding her breasts for such a long time, wearing a dress felt a wee bit odd.

Almost too revealing.

The gown was a fine one, not the kind she usually wore. And though a properly modest one, the cut was different, accentuating her breasts more than she was accustomed to.

Mayhap after she'd eaten, she'd find some breeches to borrow before she saw Ewan. Aye, her hair was still far too short for a lass, it might just be wiser to stay a lad until she'd reached home and could grow it out.

Lifting the latch, she stepped inside Cameron's privy chamber.

The place was airy and spacious. Two Spanish leather chairs sat before a fireplace, and a tapestry depicting a unicorn graced the opposite wall. A large wooden table stood in front of the open window, and upon its surface stood two silver candlesticks holding beeswax candles and between them, a bottle of Rhennish wine.

Moving to the window, she placed her palms flat on the table and leaned forward to take a deep breath of fresh pine-scented air. In the

distance, she could see the highlands spreading across the horizon and a wave of homesickness washed over her.

The ache of grief over Alec's death had finally begun to dull, at least enough to be manageable. Aye, her heart would always be sad when she thought of him, but it was time to go home. To laugh. And to think of other things, such as tall, brawny warriors with flaxen hair.

Absently rubbing her shoulder, she enjoyed the soft early summer breeze blowing against her face, and then the latch of the door clicked.

"Have ye heard from Ewan, Kate?" Merry asked.

"Aye," a man's soft voice replied.

Summoning her self-composure, she slowly turned upon her heel to see the man himself.

Ewan stood tall and broad-shouldered, and he cut an impressively imposing figure in his crisp clean shirt and magnificent MacLean plaid. With his aristocratic bearing and fine sword buckled at his side, he was every inch the formidable warrior.

Merry swallowed, feeling all at once like a brown hen fluffed up in fine feathers belonging to a fancier bird.

He didn't move. He stayed rooted upon the threshold.

Uncertain of his response, Merry cleared her voice and with an awkward wave at her gown began in a hurried explanation, "'Twas Kate's idea that it be a fine gown. I dinna care for such clothes …"

He approached then, in slow measured steps and didn't stop until he stood inches away. Reaching to smooth back a stray tendril of her hair, he whispered, "Aye. I'd rather see ye not wearing it myself."

Her cheeks warming, she drew back sharply but then saw the look in his eyes.

There was no mistaking the desire in them.

His hands slid down to slowly envelop hers and then cradling her fingers in his, he brought them up to his lips. He kissed each fingertip before moving to kiss the insides of her wrists. And then dropping her hands, he ran his fingers up her arms, leaving a trail of blazing fire so hot that she nearly choked.

Cradling her head between his hands, he kissed the top of her head and then ever so slowly, he allowed his thumb to trace her lower lip, making it tingle with pleasure.

She parted her mouth in silent invitation then and their lips met in a kiss, at first spell-bindingly gentle but growing in urgency with each passing moment.

And then he pulled her close into his arms with a satisfied growl. Coaxing her teeth open with the tip of his tongue, he took her mouth in a hard, demanding kiss, one charged with intense emotion. It was a kiss full of need, possession, a kiss that left her wanting more,

and a kiss she returned with abandon as she curved closer into his embrace.

His drew back a little then, and his chest heaved as his eyes' passionate gaze burned every inch of her body.

"Ye look unbelievingly ravishing, lass," he said in a ragged voice. "Your beauty fair steals my breath away! And 'tis a struggle to keep my eyes from straying shamelessly over ye."

She didn't want to hear more. She had no patience. With a low moan, she pulled his head back down to hers and covered his lips with a feverish kiss. He let his hands rove over her then, accidentally knocking the bottle of wine upon its side.

As the wine pooled on the flagstones, he tore his lips away and groaned. "I missed ye by my side last night. I canna sleep without ye by—"

"Is this some kind of *jest?"* Ruan's deep voice hailed.

Moving a little as if intoxicated, Ewan lifted his eyes to the door as Merry drew in a steadying breath.

Her brother, Ruan MacLeod, stood framed in the door, lean and muscular with his shoulder-length brown hair bound by his usual strip of leather. His dark brown eyes took in the scene before him as a touch of amusement warred with outright dismay upon his face.

At his side stood Cameron, the Earl of Lennox, towering in his fine cloak. His dark hair hung loose over his broad shoulders, and for a moment, it seemed his chiseled lips twitched before he quickly turned to cough into his fist.

And then several others stepped into the chamber.

The first was the grizzly-faced governor that she'd met the night before, Shaw of Sauchie.

Behind the governor stood a slender, pale-faced youth with red hair, green eyes, and a long thin nose. His fine ermine-trimmed clothing and exquisitely crafted Italian leather boots announced him to be Prince James Stewart, Duke of Rothesay, and heir apparent to the throne of Scotland.

Immediately, Merry dipped into a curtsey and the rest bowed as well.

Straightening to smooth her skirts, she then glanced up to see that the last man to enter the chamber was none other than the rail-thin Hugh Cunningham.

Merry froze.

Ewan betrayed no emotion.

Hugh's unsettling blue eyes swept over them in an indifferent inspection. It took several seconds for a belated recognition to flood his face, and his eyes quickly darted back to search their faces.

And then Ruan stepped close to enclose Merry in a warm embrace.

“Ach, ye look beleaguered and pale,” he grumbled in her ear before casting a critical brow at Ewan. “Has he not kept ye well?”

“I’m well,” Merry murmured in reply, and she reached up to plant a light peck on her brother’s cheek.

But Ruan’s hard scrutiny continued to settle upon Ewan anyway as he said in a low voice, “We’ll set the matter aside for now.”

“Aye,” Ewan agreed firmly matching his gaze.

Then the prince turned upon the governor with a polite abruptness. “I willna allow the king to enter Stirling Castle. Refuse his request.”

Cameron folded his arms and tapped lightly with his long fingers. “Such a refusal will guarantee a battle on the morrow, my prince,” he warned calmly.

“Then so be it,” James replied in a solemn manner. “If he willna resign his crown and put an end to this madness, then we have no choice but to fight. But let all know that no man, and I repeat, *no man* shall lay violent hands upon the king. I willna have my father’s blood upon my hands.”

Cameron tilted his head in respect. “Aye, your highness,” he murmured in agreement.

As Merry watched nervously, the young prince eyed each man in turn before turning upon his heel and quitting the chamber.

No one moved.

Not until Hugh Cunningham took a step toward the door.

“Cunningham,” Ewan called out as Cameron did the same.

Ewan cast him a surprised look and stepped aside as Cameron moved to block the man’s path.

“My lord?” Hugh cleared his throat with a slight bow, plainly nervous.

Cameron stood still for a moment, thoughtfully rubbing the dark stubble on his chin as he eyed Hugh keenly. Finally, he said, “I’ve heard unpleasant tidings of ye, Cunningham.”

“Tidings?” the man repeated, his eyes flicking back and forth between Ewan and Cameron. “Tidings or lies?”

A muscle ticked on Ewan’s jaw, and then he gave a mirthless chuckle. It was a disturbing sound and one so cold-hearted that Merry was certain Hugh Cunningham quaked in his boots.

“Aye, the tidings were such that I wonder if I should allow ye to fight under the prince’s banner,” Cameron continued, his lips crooking into a scathing smile.

The blood drained from Hugh’s face.

“But I’ve decided to allow Ewan to handle the matter as he sees fit.” The Earl of Lennox’s eyes flashed in a rare display of anger. “Aye, I’ll allow ye on the battlefield, Cunningham. But be aware, there may

be more swords pointed at your back than the ones ye face."

The man turned white.

"There is justice on the battlefield," Ewan ground out through clenched teeth.

"Then if ye'll excuse me, I've other matters to attend," Cameron announced with a curt nod. And then turning to Ruan, he arched an inquisitive brow.

"I'll see ye soon, my wee Merry lass," Ruan murmured, planting a brotherly kiss upon Merry's cheek.

He didn't speak to Ewan. He merely scowled his way. And then pivoting on his heel, he followed Cameron out of the chamber.

Ewan waited until the door clicked shut behind them before turning upon Hugh. "If you're a wise man, ye'll start running," he warned grimly.

Instead of answering, Hugh turned upon Merry. "We've met afore, have we not, sweetings?" he asked, letting his eyes slowly rake her from head to toe.

In one fluid movement, Ewan had unsheathed his dirk and, yanking the man's head back, pressed the blade's edge against his throat. And then glancing over at Merry, he said, "My lady, leave us, will ye?"

Chapter Thirteen – Isle Men and Their Wee Sisters

As soon as the door closed behind Merry, Hugh Cunningham asked, “Then ye’ll slay me in cold blood?”

Ewan shoved him back roughly and then thrust his dirk into its scabbard. “’Tis no less than ye deserve,” he said in a voice of deadly calm even as he seethed inside.

The man was surprised, clearly not certain if he should be pleased or angry. After a moment, he schooled his expression and bowed low.

Ewan watched him with contempt. And then he said in a low voice, “I dinna care if ye sweep the floor with your chin, Hugh. Have no fear, I’ll take my sweet vengeance.” Aye, he would, but not with Merry within the castle walls. He’d not let her see that side of him.

Hugh’s nostrils flared then and with a savage hiss, he warned, “Tread carefully with the mighty Clan Cunningham.”

Ewan snorted. “I’ve naught to fear from that soon-to-be once mighty clan.”

“Would ye truly make enemies with me over a worthless *Montgomery*?” Hugh asked angrily.

Tilting forward, Ewan placed his face inches away and warned in a barely audible voice, “Dinna speak ill of the dead else ye find yourself joining them even sooner.”

Hugh’s face lost any color that it had regained, but he managed to respond, “If ye continue this path, MacLean, ‘twill be ye who walks to certain death. The memory of Clan Cunningham is a long one.”

Ewan gave a mirthless laugh and crossing his arms, leaned back against the table. His eyes swept over Hugh in amusement. “Death is certain, Cunningham. But my death will never come by your hand—of that I am certain.”

The muscles in Hugh’s jaw worked as if he were grinding his teeth.

And then Ewan jerked his head toward the door. “I dinna want to see your face again, at least not until we’re on the battlefield. It willna matter to me which side ye fight on.”

And it didn’t. He knew quite well that Hugh would be attacking him at the first opportunity. And he welcomed it. It would make killing the man much easier.

Stiffly, Hugh exited the chamber and after a moment, Ewan left in search of Ruan and Merry.

He came upon them standing in the courtyard. They were an impressive pair. Ruan towered in his MacLeod plaid with his great sword belted at his waist. His tall, slender sister stood by his side. The soft breeze ruffled through her ebony curls and played softly with her

skirt, causing it to hug her slim form in the most fetching of ways. He couldn't resist dipping his eyes over her in quick appreciation.

Unfortunately, Ruan noticed, and his dark brows drew into a scowl.

The man's reaction was a wee bit disconcerting, and with a cautious step, Ewan moved to join them.

"I sold it," Merry was saying as he arrived. "To pay the man who helped me to free Ewan."

"'Tis no matter," Ruan replied in a distracted tone, his eyes locking over her head onto Ewan's. "You're safe, lass, that is all that matters to me. Ye had us fair worried. Saddles can be replaced, aye?"

"But 'twas not any saddle," Merry said, heaving a sigh. "'Twas finely tooled, and ye gave it to me the day I first rode Diabhul. 'Tis a day I'll never forget."

And then she noticed her brother's distraction and turning, saw Ewan.

Her face broke into a beautiful smile, a smile that made Ewan's throat close with emotion. And suddenly, he only wanted to sweep her into his arms and hold her close to his heart.

But from the look in Ruan's eyes, he knew he would be doing nothing of the sort. Tension spread from the man in expanding waves.

Clearing his throat, Ewan dropped his gaze to Merry and asked her softly, "Merry, will ye excuse us? I would speak with your brother privately."

Her response was a dark scowl that mirrored Ruan's, and at any other time, he would have found it amusing.

"Do ye think to order me about as ye please, Ewan MacLean?" she asked, a note of irritation tainting her tone.

"Nay, but I would hear what Ruan wishes to say," he replied quickly.

A gleam entered her eye, amusement mixed with something else, but it was a something else that made it fair difficult to think of anything other than the temptation of delivering a sound kiss upon her lips right then, in front of Ruan or no.

Ach, the wee beastie was teasing him.

Ignoring Ruan's darkening glare, he reached to lightly trace his knuckles over the curve of her jaw and whisper, "Please give us a moment, I beg ye, lass."

She nodded with reluctance, and looking as if she'd rather do anything else, she lifted the hem of her skirts and crossed the courtyard. He watched her disappear into the castle's main hall before turning to face Ruan with an unwelcome feeling of dread.

The man was clearly upset. He stood with his brawny arms tightly crossed over his chest, and his dark brows were furrowing into a line

of displeasure that was growing deeper by the instant.

"Did ye receive my letter?" Ewan finally broke the awkward silence.

"Aye," Ruan replied, his tone strained and his face sober.

When the silence between them stretched yet again, Ewan prodded, "Ye dinna seemed pleased at the thought of me asking for Merry's hand."

"Merry is my own wee sister, Ewan," Ruan replied with a stern lift of his brow. "Ye know better than any of us how she suffered at the hands of the MacDonald."

Ewan raised his chin. He didn't care to hear the man mentioned. "Aye, and I've never forgotten," he replied in a cool tone as he felt his jaw clench hard. "But he has naught to do with me."

"I dinna mean to liken ye to the man," Ruan inserted swiftly, but his face was still deeply troubled. "Ach, I dinna wish ye ill. I swear it, Ewan. But Merry's heart is scarred. She's suffered sorrow of the kind no one should ever see, and as a wee lassie at that."

Ewan eyed the man thoughtfully. Merry didn't seem to think herself that scarred. Mayhap it was the man's brotherly protective instincts that made him believe she still suffered. Or was he himself mistaken? Somehow, he didn't think so. Nay, the laughing, high-spirited lass he'd come to know had healed her heart and was all the stronger for it. But now was not the time to differ with her brother over the matter. Instead, with a creased brow, he asked, "And ye believe that by wedding me, she'll be scarred all the more?"

Ruan averted his gaze and stared off into the distance for a time before murmuring in a low voice, "I want nothing more than to see Merry's days filled with love and laughter, aye, overflowing with joy."

"Aye, as do I," Ewan supplied quietly.

But Ruan's eyes grew hard as he replied bluntly, "I dinna believe ye are the man who can do that for her, Ewan."

The words stung. "And why is that?" he asked in a wary tone.

"'Tis more than one reason," Ruan answered gruffly. "The first being I willna see my sister weep over your untimely death in battle. Ye live with a sword in your hand."

Ewan nodded grimly and glanced around him. There was no denying it. Everywhere, men in battle gear strode through the courtyard or along the castle's wind-ravaged ramparts.

They were at war. Or soon would be. But it would be his last battle. He knew it in his heart.

But to Ruan, he merely asked quiet-voiced, "Aye, is there more?"

"Even if ye were to survive as a warrior, ye've changed overly much," the man continued, drawing his mouth into an even harder line. "These past years, I've seen ye walking about as a man dead. I

dinna believe ye remember how to smile. I fathom all too well that the years have been too harsh on ye. Aye, all of us understand. But … I canna see Merry yoked to a man who canna make her smile."

Ewan took his words in silently, but when the man didn't speak for a time, he let out his pent-up breath and asked, "Is there yet more?"

"I canna think of more," Ruan admitted, jaw still set.

Ewan bowed his head in relief. 'Twas not insurmountable.

But before he could reply, Ruan added, "I'll nae be of another mind about it, Ewan. Let's end the matter here, aye? We've a battle that must be fought. 'Tis time to think of other things."

He turned as if to go, but Ewan stepped in front of him and blocked his path. "Nay, Ruan. I respect ye as much as my own father, but I'll have no other lass. So I'll be seeing your mind changed whether ye want it or no."

Ruan's dark eyes locked on his. "Do ye think to fight me for her?" he growled in a low warning.

"Nay, Ruan," Ewan replied softly. "I'll be laying my sword *down* for her. After this battle, I'm returning to Mull to walk the beaches with my fair lady, a lady who has taught me to laugh again, and a lady whom I will see only ever smiles as we listen to the laughter of our own wee bairns. I dinna plan on leaving the Isles again, as long as I walk the face of this Earth."

For a moment, he thought Ruan would strike him down, but then the man breathed slowly, and for the first time, the grim line of his mouth relaxed. "Are ye begging me to teach ye manners, lad?" he asked.

Lad.

Ruan hadn't called him "lad" in such a fond tone in years. He knew it was a tone of concession, no matter how slight.

"If ye truly lay down your sword, then I'll think on the matter," Ruan slowly relented. "I'm not an unreasonable man."

"Aye," Ewan nodded. He couldn't resist smiling a little.

"And I would see with mine own eyes that ye truly have changed," Ruan continued gruffly. "'Twill take time, lad. Mayhap years."

Ewan merely nodded, knowing he could only push the man so far at once.

And then Cameron strode across the courtyard, his dark blue mantle billowing out behind him. Raising an elegant hand, he delivered a crisp order to one of the guards before heading their way.

"The king approaches the city," he said once he was within earshot. "Ride with me, aye? I would try one last time to end this peacefully."

Ewan followed them to the stables where they were met by the governor leading four battle chargers and, mounting quickly, they galloped out of the castle gate and down the winding cobblestoned streets of Castle Hill.

The day was a warm one, and the sun was bright.

From his vantage point, everything appeared peaceful and serene with the swans gracefully gliding in the waters of the River Forth and a gentle breeze rippling the soft grasses on the fields below them.

But Ewan knew soon enough those same green fields would be filled with the smoke of battle and the screams of dying men. Fingering his sword hilt absently, he bowed his head and prayed that Cameron could succeed in averting the pending bloodshed.

He was weary of war.

About a mile from Stirling they met the king and several of his men upon the east side of the small brook named Sauchieburn. And after they'd all come to a halt, Cameron advanced as the king urged his fine black horse forward to meet him.

The king wore a doublet of emerald silk trimmed in sable and cinched with a silver studded belt. His pale red hair clung to his forehead in thin, wispy locks. His pallid face was long and oval, his lips thin, and his eyes heavily lidded.

He was a very different man than his tall, dark cousin, Cameron.

"The doors of Castle Stirling are shut to ye, James," Cameron announced without preamble.

The king did not miss the flagrant omission of his title, and his face flushed with anger. Whether it was because he'd been denied entrance to his own castle or that he had been addressed by his Christian name, like a mere commoner, Ewan couldn't be certain.

The king then raised his chin. "And why shan't we be admitted to our own royal residence?" he asked, clearly furious. "We must speak with our son, the prince, at once!"

"I'll not mince words with ye, James." Cameron sat straight in the saddle, his voice ringing with quiet authority. "Ye dinna possess the talents for governing, and ye are seen far and wide as an imprudent, feeble-minded, aye, even a foolish man, with a heedless obsession to seek meaning in the stars. Heavens, for the sake of your kingdom, resign the crown for the sake of Scotland!"

The king's face darkened. "Fie, traitor!" he sputtered. "Dare ye speak such words to us? Ye know well of the prophecy! We had no choice—"

"'Twas ye alone who made that prophecy come true." Cameron's lips crooked into a scathing smile. "Ye killed your own brother Mar at the advice of your lover and made enemies of us all over the words of a woman who claimed one of your own would rise up against ye. Ye

forced us to stand. And even now, your son doesna wish to slay ye, even though ye seem ye dinna suffer from the same compunction."

"He's a traitor if he doesna obey his king and disband his army," the king replied, his chin jiggling a little as he spoke. "But then, he's been a traitor from the start."

Cameron made no attempt to hide his disgust. "He's still your son, James. Regardless of it all, he's still your son—a son ye all but disowned at an early age and a son ye made an enemy the day ye bestowed his own wee brother with the same name of *James*. 'Twas clear then, that ye preferred the younger lad to be king and to carry on your name. Ach, 'twas ye who started this feud betwixt your own blood."

"Treachery!" the king said, clearly unwilling to listen. "The lot of ye are traitors. Already the chieftains from the north are riding here to attend my standard—"

"'Tis foolish to fight us, James," Cameron interrupted with an impatient wave of his long fingers. "If ye let yourself be drawn onto the field, ye'll not win."

"Your rebels are at Falkirk." The king regarded him coldly.

"Nay," Cameron warned, his dark eyes hardening with contempt. "Already, they are at Torwood Bridge. We've cut ye off, James, ye and your men. Ye havena the forces to withstand us, and the way back to Edinburgh is closed to ye now. Resign, and let us not force our men to shed the blood of their kin."

A muscle twitched near the king's mouth. This news was clearly surprising. And then he dropped his lids to hood his eyes as he asked, "And ye, Cameron, would ye twist the cold blade of a dirk straight into your own king's heart?"

"Not willingly," Cameron answered with an arch of his brow. "But I canna allow ye to drag this country through years of bloodshed and war. This matter must be settled. This must end. 'Twould be best for all if ye resigned with Scots' dignity and honor."

"An insolent and arrogant man ye've turned out to be," the king raised his voice along with his fist, his gold rings flashing in the sunlight. "And an insipid, treasonous one. Aye, we'll take to the field, and we'll lay your army waste, Cameron! And we'll see ye hung on a bridge as a traitor!"

Ewan raised his brow in surprise at the viciousness of his tone.

And then the king wheeled his horse's head around and galloped away with his men close behind.

"It was as fruitless as I feared 'twould be," Cameron said, heaving a sigh. "We must prepare. On the morrow, there is war."

The party then returned to Stirling, subdued.

And they'd no sooner ridden under that city's gray-stoned gate

than they were met by Merry, wide-eyed with concern.

"Merry, ye must leave at once, my wee lass," Ruan declared as he dismounted.

Cameron handed his horse off to a stable lad and joined them. "Aye, ye should hie off to Cambuskenneth Abbey. I'll be sending my wee Kate and the lassies there as well," he said kindly. "On the morrow, this will be no place for women and children."

Merry's dark brows knit into a scowl, a scowl that her brother instantly mirrored. "I'll not have ye say otherwise, Merry," he warned, locking his firm jaw.

"And have I no say?" Merry exploded, her dark eyes flashing. And then she turned to Ewan. "Surely, ye canna let them send me away?"

"Aye, I would see ye safe in Cambuskenneth myself," Ewan said, stepping forward to join them.

"And ye? Are ye fighting?" she asked, her nostrils flaring. "Has your wound healed, aye? Should ye even be lifting a sword?"

Stifling the smile threatening his lips, Ewan reached over and cupped her chin in the palm of his hand. "I'll not be dying any time soon, I swear it, Merry."

Tears threatened her expressive brown eyes, and she turned upon her brother. "And ye? Are ye drawing your sword as well?"

Ruan smiled and bent down to kiss the top of her head. "Aye, but ye know right well that no man can withstand the rage of a MacLeod, lass," he said.

"I'm a MacLeod, Ruan, and dinna ye forget it," she choked, furiously wiping the tears from her eyes. "I'm fair angry with the both of ye. But return to me, so I can keep being angry with ye for several years at least, aye?"

Cameron's brow creased in laughter though his lips remained set in a line as Ruan chuckled outright.

"I swear it, my wee Merry lass, and I'll expect your wrath for years to come," her brother said then, and catching Ewan's eye, he gave an almost imperceptible nod before shifting his eyes back to his sister. "I'll trust Ewan to see ye on your way then. I must be going."

And then drawing Merry close for a final farewell peck on the cheek, Ruan turned on his heel and joined Cameron to cross the courtyard and disappear into Stirling's main hall.

Ewan lifted his brow, a little surprised at Ruan's response, but more than a wee bit grateful. The man was warming up a bit faster than he'd expected.

"Are ye truly sending me away?" Merry broke into his thoughts, her voice catching with unshed tears.

Leaning down, he whispered into her hair, "I must, lass. And I would see ye leave at once. Cambuskenneth is not far. When this is

over, I'll fetch ye there, I swear it."

Her face crumpled as if she would cry, but she stubbornly refused to let the tears fall. "Marry me, Ewan," she said in a tone of desperation. "I would have at least one night with ye, afore the dawn. Let us find a priest and—"

"Nay." He shook his head and drew her close in his arms.

"Because of Ruan?" she asked, lifting her distraught eyes to search his.

"Your brother would be greatly displeased, and he's a force to be reckoned with, to be sure," he answered with a tight smile. "But nay, I'd not sleep the night, and with the dawn, I'll be needing my wits about me. Give me something to fight for, aye? I'll return to ye, I swear it. Not a sword will harm me. Now, let's ready Diabhul, and I'll ride ye to the abbey, aye?"

She didn't speak as, with a light touch at the small of her back, he guided her to the stables. Once inside, they moved to stand in front of Diabhul's stall and then, not really certain who found whose mouth first, he was kissing her.

Her soft, tempting mouth was warm, and she responded hungrily, melting against him as he traced the curve of her lips with his tongue. Her hands slid up his chest to lock behind his neck as he let his fingers drop to roam over the curve of her hip in a gentle caress.

His mouth fused over hers in a deepening passion until finally, a soft sound escaped her throat.

At once, he broke the kiss, and took a deep, calming breath. Aye, he had to stop or else he'd end up taking her in the stables. 'Twas not how he wanted to make her his.

Brushing the back of his hand across her cheek, he murmured, "'Tis time ye left, lass."

She swallowed, looking dazed. "Aye," she murmured.

But then, she was pulling his head down and melding his mouth to hers once again.

'Twas fair difficult to leave the lass, she was a storm of temptation. With great difficulty, he pulled his lips away from hers.

He stood there then, looking down at her as he lightly traced her jawline with his thumb. And then she lay her head against his shoulder, and he rested his chin upon the silkiness of her raven hair.

He wanted to stay there forever, with her nestled against him. It took every ounce of his strength to step away. Her lips were swollen with his kisses. It was fair difficult to resist sweeping her back into his arms and to claim them again and again.

But he did.

In silence, he helped her saddle Diabhul and lead him out of the stables. And then mounting his own horse, they cantered out of

Stirling Castle's stone gate, down St. Mary's Wynd leading from the town to the Cambuskenneth Abbey a short distance away.

And all too soon, they saw the abbey's stone walls and the tower rising behind it, centered in the expansive greensward with gardens and orchards nearby.

But Merry was not eager to enter. At the banks of the Forth winding around the abbey walls, she dismounted Diabhul and held out her hand.

They walked, side-by-side, their fingers laced together, not speaking for a time.

But upon reaching the walls, Merry soberly eyed the massive tower before her. "'Tis where the queen was buried last year, was it not?" she asked quietly.

"Aye." Ewan nodded.

He remembered her funeral well, and regardless of the prince's wish, he was certain that her husband, the king, would soon join her in her cold abbey crypt.

It was a disturbing thing, to know when a man would die. He could only wonder of himself. Would he ride to these abbey walls on the morrow, to fetch Merry as he'd promised? Before, he'd never thought of dying and what he'd might miss. He'd always just thought of winning the battle. It had almost been a game, a match of wits. Aye, 'twas a game ordered to be played by the nobles just to gain power. But now. Now, with Merry's hand in his, he no longer wished to play along. He wanted only to spend the rest of his days walking, as they did now.

He could see the fear in her eyes, but he didn't acknowledge it. He couldn't. He had to be strong in order to give her hope and to ease her suffering. Together, they entered the abbey, and the abbot himself met them at the arched door of the massive tower. And then it was truly time to say farewell.

Once again, he swore, "I'll be here on the morrow, lass. Dinna fret."

Her eyes were wide and her face pinched as she nodded firmly. "I know ye'll come back to me, Ewan. My heart tells me so."

Under the watchful eye of the abbot, Ewan smoothed her hair back and stooped a little to plant a chaste kiss on her forehead. And then kneeling before the priest, he bowed his head to receive his blessing.

Rising to his feet, he bowed to her one last time before mounting his horse.

Merry watched him desperately, as if she were trying to memorize his every movement. And then darting forward, she caught his stirrup.

"I dinna want to let go," she said, her voice wavering.

Kissing his fingers, he leaned from the saddle to press them against her cheek. “I’m asking you not to fret, lass,” he said gently. “I will return to ye, I swear it.”

He galloped away then and didn’t look back.

It was time for war.

But this time it was different. This time, he spurred his way to the battlefield, carrying with him the image in his mind of a spirited lass with a cloud of midnight hair, a slender waist, and a bonny smile that filled his heart.

He let himself think of her for only a few minutes before he set all feelings aside and distanced himself from all else save fighting to win.

He returned to Stirling then, and after a meal of boiled onions and hare, he joined the others, ready to ride.

It had been decided that the main contingency fighting for the prince, which included all the leading nobles of the realm and their men, would leave the castle at once to join their forces at Torwood Bridge.

They were all dressed for battle. The prince, Cameron. Ruan, and many others.

But Hugh Cunningham was nowhere to be found.

Straightening his plaid, Ewan pulled on his leather gloves and with his dirk at his waist and a broadsword strapped to his back, he cantered down Castle Hill, leaving the castle and its town behind him.

In less than an hour, they’d arrived at Torwood Bridge to see war tents with boldly striped awnings dotting the grassy field, each flying their standard. And upon spying the Douglas crest, they urged their steeds forward.

Crows scattered from the trees as they approached Archibald’s tent.

A horn blew in the distance.

And then Archibald stepped out to greet them, his red face splitting into a wide grin as he beckoned them inside.

Handing the reins of his horse to a gangly lad with a missing tooth, Ewan followed the others and ducking low, entered the tent.

A large table took up most of the interior. Upon its surface scattered parchments mingled with half-empty trenchers and tallow candles dripped wax over the entire lot.

The young prince remained only a moment before retiring, and he’d scarcely gone before Cameron turned to Archibald.

“The king is not to be harmed,” the dark-haired Earl of Lennox informed the man. “See that every man knows this. We seek only to force James to resign the crown. We dinna want his blood. His son does not want his blood.”

Archibald’s mouth dropped open in astonishment. “Ach, ‘twill

never happen!" he burst out, pounding his fist upon the table. "The man willna let the crown loose from his fingers until he is dead, and even then we'll have to pry it from his cold stiff fingers."

"'Tis the will of the prince," Cameron repeated calmly and levelled his gaze upon the man. "A prince soon to be your king. When James sees his army fleeing afore us, he may surprise ye. A courageous king willing to die for his country he is not."

Archibald crossed his arms and scowled, but then the talk turned to the impending battle and the various strategies that might be used.

And at that, Ewan found himself engaged.

Finally, it was decided that he, along with his cousin, Julian, would head the second line with the goal of pressing through the ranks to capture the king alive.

Ewan rose then and with an impassive nod, bid them all a good night.

He was keenly aware of Ruan's eyes locked upon his emotionless face, but he couldn't allow it to matter. 'Twould be the only way to survive, to reach what he wanted in the end.

It was the only path to Merry.

He was at the door when Archibald said, "Aye, 'twill be slaughter on the morrow. The king is stuck with no place to hide and cut off from a retreat to Edinburgh. There is no way we can possibly lose. His ships canna even join him; the river is too shallow here."

"Aye," Cameron expelled a long breath. "The man really is a fool. He shouldna have come here. His force is inferior in every respect."

But Archibald looked far less grim. Indeed, he was laughing, quite jolly.

Deciding that he was truly weary of it all, Ewan stepped outside into the gathering darkness.

Several of his men met him then, the ones who had shared his imprisonment in Carlisle. They exchanged tidings for a time, but then he moved away. And settling under a nearby tree, he prayed again that Cameron would somehow avert the battle entirely, and then he rolled himself into his plaid to sleep.

He woke at dawn, rising in the chill of the morning air only to discover that there was no last-minute reprieve.

The king had already moved what forces he had to camp near the small brook of Sauchieburn, not far from the celebrated field of Bannockburn.

It was certain. They would fight this day.

Clenching his jaw, Ewan strode forward with purpose and mounting his horse, which had been made ready by a squire, he galloped to survey the battle lines he was to command.

The men were ready, hardy borderers inured to war, well-armed

and well-disciplined.

Julian was already there, waiting.

And falling into rank beside him, Ewan folded his gloved hands over the pommel of his saddle and sat with his cousin in silence for the sound of the horn, their signal to move.

The first line—hardy spearmen from East Lothian and the Merse—departed, led by Lords Hailes and Hume.

All watched as they passed before the young prince, mounted upon a fine white battle charger with Cameron by his side.

And then the horn split the morning air.

Turning his horse in a half-circle, Ewan grimly crossed himself, and then with an impatient gesture, his blood-curdling battle cry of *Bàs no Beatha!* rent the air. Drawing his sword, he spurred his stallion forward and was followed at once by the rumbling thunder of horses' hooves churning behind him.

It was their turn to pass before the prince, and then they were charging the battlefield, with the young prince and Cameron falling into place behind them.

The army advanced rapidly from Torwood, approaching the Sauchieburn from the east.

Smoke hung heavy in the air as Ewan arrived.

Some of the northern clans had arrived during the night, and the men armed with axes and swords were advancing.

Behind them, heading the main battle was King James III himself. Clad in splendid armor, he rode a tall gray horse. Wearing a fur-trimmed cloak, he had a great broad sword belted about his waist and he carried an elaborate silver shield. He looked every inch the part of a warrior king.

And at the moment, his forces were winning.

Ewan eyed the field spreading out before him in dismay. Lords Hume and Hailes were quickly losing ground to the northern highlanders.

Ewan clenched his jaw.

It was time to put an end to it.

Raising his sword and with his clan's battle cry upon his lips, Ewan, with Julian behind him, led his men forward, sallying forth under a volley of arrows as banners were unfurled and heralds sounded their trumpets.

The king's men scattered before them like a panicked flock of hens, and Ewan pressed forward in a steady attack, pushing the royal forces back.

And then an arrow struck betwixt his mount's armor, and Ewan was forced to abandon the beast, raising his shield to fend off his attackers.

The coppery scent of blood filled his nostrils as he tossed them off like gnats.

He didn't allow himself to think; he only heard the resounding ring of metal clashing against metal.

Sweat stung his eyes.

Burning pain lanced down his arm.

He ignored it.

This was his last battle. He just had to get through to the end. The men before him thinned out, much like trees thinning on the edge of a dense forest. And then they were through the king's defense, having recovered the lost ground with such vigor that the king's commanders retreated at once in confusion.

Wiping his face with his forearm, Ewan glanced in all directions.

And then paused.

Only a stone's throw away sat James himself upon his gray horse, his face registering considerable alarm. And even as he watched, the king violently wheeled his horse's head. And digging his heels into the beast's side, he fled the battle like a coward, escaping toward the nearby village of Bannockburn.

A white horse streaked past Ewan, and he saw it was Julian, riding low over the neck of the animal, galloping in hot pursuit of the fleeing monarch.

Suddenly, there was a cry from behind, and whirling, Ewan lifted his shield as a sword came crashing down.

Driven to his knees from the weight of his attack, he looked up into the eyes of his assailant.

It was Hugh Cunningham.

Chapter Fourteen – Beaton's Mill

"Are ye ready to meet the wrath of Clan Cunningham, ye whoreson?" Hugh hissed as he hovered over Ewan. There was a maniacal gleam in his blue eyes as he bared his teeth to add, "I've dreamt the entire night of sheathing my sword in your flesh. Who's the stronger man now, aye? Who is upon their knees, aye?" He jabbed the point of the sword at Ewan with each sentence.

With a grim smile touching his lips, Ewan swat the blade away and rose swiftly to his feet. He looked the rail-thin man in the eye, and in a strong deep voice, said, "And I thank ye for attacking me. 'Twill be easier now to leave ye dead, slaughtered on the moor with only crows to pick your bones."

Hugh faltered and, turning white, took a step back.

But Ewan advanced, moving slowly, as if he had all the time in the world.

"I would wash my hands of the matter, if I could," he gritted out fiercely, continuing to drive the man back, step-by-step. "But I canna leave it be. Not now. Not with Alec's death left to avenge. Aye, I will enable Clan Montgomery to win this one between ye."

At the mention of the Montgomery winning, fury suffused Hugh's pale face and, lifting his sword, he lunged at Ewan.

It was too easy.

Ewan feinted left, and then in one fluid motion, he thrust his sword with uncommon speed.

And then it was over.

Hugh fell lifeless to the ground.

Ewan closed his eyes, ill to his stomach. He ran his hands tiredly over his face and through his sweat-drenched hair.

At last, Alec could rest in peace.

And mayhap—if he dared to hope such a thing—just mayhap he had slain his last man.

Bowing his head, he crossed himself, and then catching the neck of the nearest riderless horse, he swung himself into the saddle and galloped off after Julian and the king.

* * *

The night had been a sleepless one.

One Merry had spent pacing the abbey. She'd make her way past the chapterhouse, on toward the refectory and behind it to the many-purposed outbuildings. And then after climbing the spiral staircase to the top of Cambuskenneth's tower, she'd peer for a time at the night sky before returning to the chapterhouse and starting the entire trek anew.

Whenever she would pass the chapel, the aged abbot would kindly invite her to join him in silent vigil before the alter. She acquiesced several times, but she was much too restless to kneel upon the cold church pavers the entire night. She must keep moving.

Lady Kate had arrived at the abbey late in the evening, but she was of little company to Merry. The wee countess was concerned for Cameron and the others in her own right. And her unborn babe left her so weary and exhausted that she'd fallen into a fitful, uneasy sleep. It would be cruel to disturb her.

It was nearly dawn when Merry arrived at the top of the abbey tower once more. After taking in a long, deep breath of chill night air, she saw it. A line of twinkling, bobbing torches snaking down through the hills from the north. Her heart leapt to her throat. She could only watch in horror knowing it was exactly what she had feared to see.

The highlanders from the north had arrived to reinforce the king's army.

Biting her nails and feeling ill, she watched as they filed past the abbey walls, knocking their swords on their shields in time with each step. Aye, she knew that each man had his own story, most likely his own wee wife and bairn, but at that moment, she could only see enemies, hardy, muscled men that Ewan must fight if he were to come back to her alive.

Why had it come to this?

If only she could weep, mayhap it would provide some relief.

But she couldn't shed a tear. She'd refused to let the tears fall when Ewan had bid his farewell. How could she have let him ride to battle with the memory of tears upon her face?

But now that she was free to weep in peace, the tears still wouldn't fall.

Soon, the army disappeared around the base of Castle Hill, and as dawn painted the sky with a hint of color, she quite suddenly made up her mind.

She wouldn't stay put in the abbey. She had to see what was happening. To wait for tidings till after all was done would be nigh unbearable torture.

'Twould be simple enough a task to leave unhindered; no one was watching her movements. Nor, now that she thought on it, had anyone insisted she stay within the abbey walls the entire time. She squashed the twinge of conscience at that thought, knowing full well that Ruan and Ewan would be furious if they ever discovered what she had decided to do.

But she didn't care.

Glancing down at her fine dress, she grimaced. Certainly, she couldn't ride about in such clothing. She ran a hand through her short

raven curls.

Aye, ‘twas time to take up the garb of a lad once again.

Scurrying down the tower stairs, she hurried through the silent refectory to an outbuilding stacked with washtubs. Most of them were empty, but she soon found one full of clothing to be washed. Fair reeking they were, but she didn’t care. She then fished out a brown cloak, a pair of homespun breeches, and a long shirt.

Rolling the clothing into a bundle, she threw the cloak over her shoulders and strode to the stables. It was early, but the monks were already moving about and tending to the horses when she arrived.

With her heart pounding, she made her way to Diabhul, but when she began to buckle his saddle, one of the monks headed her way.

“God’s blessing to ye this morning, my child,” the white-haired man with bushy black brows greeted her. “Do ye think to leave the abbey?”

Merry forced her lips into a calm smile and, praying she wouldn’t roast in hell for lying to a priest, turned to curtsey politely.

“’Tis my horse, father. Diabhul needs to stretch his legs and run for a bit or he’ll be biting the others,” she explained and then paused as it struck her as oddly amusing that she was speaking of a horse named “Devil” to a priest.

He seemed to follow her thoughts and smiled himself. “Aye, then, go with God while we pray for this wicked one’s soul, aye?” He stretched out his hand as if to pat Diabhul’s broad head but sharply drew it back as the black stallion lunged for it. Cocking a wry brow at Merry, he added, “It seems he’s rightly named, my child!”

Making the sign of the cross, the man then shuffled off, leaving Merry torn between guilt and amusement.

But she would confess her sins later.

Leading Diabhul from the stables, she swung herself into the saddle and guided him through the orchards, heavy with early-summer fruit, and then to the abbey gates. Once they were through, they galloped down the road, leaving Cambuskenneth Abbey behind them.

Merry closed her eyes, finding peace in Diabhul’s strength and the morning breezes caressing her face. Several times, she glanced over her shoulder to see if the abbot had sent a party after her, but there was no sign of pursuit.

Scanning the roadside, she found a dense cluster of birches close by. Guiding Diabhul into them, she dismounted and swiftly slipped out of her gown and into men’s clothing once again.

She gagged at the stench and could only hope the stink would air out as she rode. Tucking her rolled gown into her saddlebag, she remounted Diabhul and made her way toward Castle Hill, with the

great castle of Stirling resting on its crown.

It didn't take long to reach, and she'd only ascended halfway when she spied the king's tents clustered in the distance near the Sauchieburn.

Merry scowled.

She was too far away to see anything of use other than the fact the enemy's army stood at the ready. She couldn't even see the banners from this distance. She'd have to get a little closer.

Biting her lip, she turned her horse around and leaving Stirling behind her, headed on a southerly course, taking to the surrounding woods. At intervals, she could see the day brightening in the gaps through the trees overhead.

On occasion, she saw hawks soaring high in the air, or at least she prayed they were hawks and not vultures gathering to pick the bones of the dead.

Then, smelling smoke, she broke through the trees and guided Diabhul to where a number of peasant women stood, baskets on their hips and their hands shading their eyes in order to view the battle.

Exchanging a quick nod of solemn greeting, Merry joined them but remained seated in the saddle for a better view. From her vantage point, she was now close enough to see the king sitting on his fine gray horse, facing west.

And then, as she watched, the highlanders raised their bows and let loose a volley of arrows as the horizon darkened with the arrival of the prince's army.

She'd arrived just in time.

And it was torture. It was impossible to discern the identity of any man in the sea of faces raging before her. She could only hope that somewhere in the chaos, Ewan still lived.

The king remained isolated, surrounded by his guards as he sat watching the battle upon his nervously pawing mount. At first, it was difficult to tell who was winning. But then the king's banner moved further out, taking over the prince's, and it was clear that the king had the advantage.

Merry's heart sank.

But then, the second line of the prince's army advanced from Torwood, the thunder of their hooves shaking the ground. At the head, she saw Lord Gray's banner unfurled in the wind. Her breath caught in her throat, knowing Ewan would be somewhere close by. Locking her eyes on the waving colors, she followed the banner closely.

Nothing seemed to change at first, but then there was no denying it. The men under Lord Gray's banner inexorably pushed forward, cutting a swath through the king's defenses and leaving only ruin in

their wake.

The king's forces began to retreat, slowly at first, but in an ever-quickening tide. Black smoke hung in the air, billowing from the king's tents, and then Merry saw the king himself, fleeing the grassy field and heading straight for the forest.

Straight her way.

The peasant women screamed and fled.

Merry was right behind them.

Crashing through the underbrush, she leapt Diabhul over the rivulet of Bannockburn and then steered him straight into the narrow hamlet of Milltown, which sent fowl scattering and squawking out of her path.

When she reached the far side of the village, she sharply reined Diabhul in to scan behind her but there was nothing to be seen other than a flock of affronted hens clucking angry insults her way.

Merry took a deep calming breath and decided that it was time to return to the abbey. Turning Diabhul's head, she dug her heel into his side. But he'd only gone two steps before she drew him to a halt, alarmed to discover he was limping.

Lurching from the saddle, she quickly inspected his hooves to find a particularly sharp stone embedded in his front hoof.

"Ach, ye wee laddie," she crooned to him under her breath. "We'll set ye to rights, dinna fear."

A quick glance revealed a mill perched on the edge of the Bannockburn, only a stone's throw away. It was a large structure with crow-stepped gables and a painted sign naming it *Beaton's Mill*.

Taking up the reins, Merry guided Diabhul forward.

The miller's wife met her with a smile, a pleasant, middle-aged woman with brown hair and sympathetic gray eyes. The miller wasn't present, but she led Merry to their stable and invited her to use the man's tools to remove Diabhul's stone.

Tethering the stallion to a post, Merry found a black hoof pick. And with the familiar sent of stable and horse calming her nerves, she set about tending Diabhul's hoof. It took a bit of strength to pry the stone loose, but she finally succeeded in exposing the cut.

"Mayhap ye should soak it afore ye go on your way?" the miller's wife suggested when she dropped by to inspect Merry's progress. Picking up a nearby bucket, she volunteered, "I'll bring ye some water from the burn, lass."

Merry nodded her thanks, pressing her fingers into the cut to staunch the blood. It was only a small wound. He'd be sore for a wee bit, but he'd be fine soon.

And then the hens along the road squawked in such a racket that Merry craned her head to see a lone horseman careening their way.

He was resplendent in fine armor and riding a gray battle charger.

Stunned, she could only stare in disbelief.

It was the king. He'd lost his fine cloak and his silver shield, but there was no doubt. It *was* the king. As she watched, he lurched toward the mill, swaying in the saddle. And as he came upon the miller's wife drawing water from the burn, he startled her and she screamed, dropping her bucket.

The king's gray horse took fright, and swerving sharply to the side, reared back and unseated its rider.

Merry watched in horror as the king fell, crashing to the ground. Clad in full battle armor, the noise of his fall was astonishingly loud, enough so to draw the attention of the miller's sons in the fields. The lads set off at a dead run toward their mother where she stood, her hands clasped over her mouth as she looked at the man lying unmoving at her feet.

Slightly dazed, Merry moved to join them.

"Who is he, ma?" one of the lads asked, a tall brawny youth with a shock of blond hair.

"I dinna rightly know." His mother swallowed, looking quite upset. "I thought he was a ghost, I did. Is he … dead?"

Cautiously, Merry leaned close and lifted the visor of the king's helmet. Placing a finger under his nose, she waited a moment.

And then she felt it. A soft, whispering breath.

"He lives," she said in relief.

The miller's wife and her sons expelled loud thankful sighs.

"Then let's take him inside," the woman said, waving at the boys to make haste. "We should remove his armor, aye? He'll be too heavy to carry otherwise."

As they unbuckled his chest plate, Merry rose and surveyed the area for any signs of pursuit. 'Twas strange that the king should end up alone. Surely, his men would be nearby to protect him?

But the road in both directions stood vacant.

"Carry him in now, lads, and lay him on the bed," she heard the miller's wife say, and turning, Merry discovered the king already divested of his armor.

The lads hefted the unconscious man between them then, as their mother followed, shooing them onward as though herding a flock of geese. Cautiously, they moved toward the cottage, which hid behind the mill.

"'Tis a strange day," the woman said as Merry fell into step beside her. "I wonder who the poor man is? I feel fair awful for causing him harm."

Merry eyed the woman a moment, wondering if she should divulge that her sons carried the King of Scotland. But then deciding it

would only upset the woman more, she kept her silence.

Instead, recalling the prince had ordered his father not be harmed, she said, “We should send for a priest to tend his wounds.”

“Aye,” the miller’s wife agreed at once, opening the cottage door for the lads. “I’ll send my boys for one once we get the man settled.”

The cottage was a humble one. Made of stacked stone, it had just two rooms, a dirt floor, and a simple thatch roof. Gently, the lads lay the king upon a bed and drew a worn plaid over him as a coverlet. And then heeding their mother’s instructions, quickly left to fetch a priest.

The king didn’t move at first, but then his eyes opened and with a groan, he lifted his head and stared at his surroundings in confusion. However, then spying the miller’s wife, he stretched out his hand in entreaty.

“Send for a priest,” he gasped, seeming to find breathing difficult. “I would confess ere I die.”

“Now, let’s not have talk of dying, aye?” the woman responded, rushing to his side to pat him gently upon the shoulder. “I’ve sent my sons for a priest, but not to shrive ye, my lord. But to heal ye, aye?”

He drew his pale brows into a frown.

“And what might I call ye, my lord?” the woman continued kindly. “I sincerely regret startling your horse, I do. Tell me, is there a message we might send on your behalf?”

Merry drew her lips into a line, and from her place by the window saw a look of caution suffuse the king’s face. He waited a moment and then closed his eyes.

“Aye, ‘tis as it was foretold,” he whispered through pale lips. “The Lion of Scotland shall be devoured by his whelps. Cameron was right. ‘Twas never Mar. ‘Twas my own son … *because* of Mar.” His voice cracked.

“Eh?” The miller’s wife frowned in confusion, and then when the king didn’t respond, she glanced at Merry with a helpless shrug.

Slowly, Merry came to stand at the foot of the bed.

The king lay there, muttering to himself, and then his troubled gaze focused on them once again.

“Alas,” he said in a voice so soft they could hardly hear it. “I was your sovereign this morning.”

The woman’s jaw dropped open, and then wringing her hands in an utter panic, she ran out of the cottage and wailed after her sons to hurry back with the priest.

Apprehension shivered down Merry’s spine as she stared at the now-silent monarch, and for a moment, she was fair tempted to throw up her hands herself and run after the miller’s wife.

Instead, she curtsied deeply, even though she was still clad as a

lad, and then she returned to peer out the window overlooking the stable yard and to bite her already worn nails.

Surely, someone would come to take over the king's care soon?

She'd scarcely thought it when the miller's sons could be seen, returning. One of the lads led a horse carrying a comely young man wearing the homespun brown tunic of a priest.

The horse caught Merry's attention first. It was a fine animal. Its nostrils flared wide, and it moved with a confident step in much the same manner as a battle charger. 'Twas hardly a horse a priest might ride.

And then the priest dismounted, sliding to the ground. Drawing his hood about his face, he bowed his head and strode toward the cottage. There was strength in his step, the heft of a warrior's.

As he ducked under the low door, Merry instinctively stepped forward.

Immediately, the man turned her way.

She swallowed. What was she doing? She had no right to interfere, especially when the eyes of the man staring into her own appeared calm and earnest.

"I am Father John, lad," he introduced himself quietly, and then his gaze flitted to the king lying on the bed.

Lad. How easy it was to forget that she must still play the part of a lad. Clearing her throat, she stepped back and nodded at the king. "His Majesty is in need of your aid."

"Then I shall do what I can," the man responded with a dip of his cleft chin.

Brushing past her, he moved to kneel next to the bed, and first making the sign of the cross, he then placed a gentle hand upon the monarch's shoulder.

The king's eyes opened at once and upon seeing the priest, he gasped. "Father, I am certain to die this day. I would confess straightway so that my sins do not follow me."

"Aye, my son," the priest acknowledged kindly. "Tell me, how were ye wounded?"

The king swallowed and replied weakly, "I was knocked from the back of my horse and crushed by the weight of mine own armor."

The young priest was silent a moment.

For the briefest of moments, Merry could have sworn she saw an expression of outright contempt sweep across his face.

But then he spoke, and his voice was only kind, comforting. "Your wounds do not appear so grievous that ye might not yet recover from them, my son."

The king took strength in his words. "Aye, then there is hope still?" He seized on the words desperately but then grasped at the holy

man's robe and demanded all the same, "But I would still confess my sins. I would be prepared and not die unshriven, father. The prophecy says that I shall die."

"We all shall die," the priest answered quietly. "Ye shouldna hold to the Black Arts, my son. They are the pathway to the devil."

Merry crossed herself and stepped to the door, suddenly ashamed to be eavesdropping upon the confession of a king.

But she'd scarcely taken a step toward the door when the priest rose to his feet.

And then a flash caught her eye.

Whirling, she saw a dagger in the man's hand and even as she watched, he viciously plunged the weapon directly into the king's chest as he lay unresisting upon the bed.

The king made a strangled, gargling sound.

And then the priest raised his hand again. And again. And yet again, he attacked the king with the dagger, almost as if to assure himself that he was truly dead.

Merry could only watch, rooted to the spot by her own shock.

And then with the dagger still in his hand, the man turned toward Merry.

Chapter Fifteen – I'm Not Saved Yet

Having caught up with Julian, Ewan rode beside him through the hamlet of Milltown in pursuit of the king. They had lost and found his trail several times, and it appeared they were losing his trail yet again when Julian paused on the banks of the Bannockburn and pointed.

"There, by the mill. 'Tis that not the king's horse?" he asked in a weary tone.

Brushing his hair tiredly back from his eyes, Ewan followed Julian's gaze to see the king's gray charger idly nibbling tufts of grass growing aside the burn. The afternoon sunlight glinted off what appeared to be discarded armor nearby.

They had just exchanged puzzled looks when screams issued from the vicinity of the mill.

At once, they wheeled their mounts and charged for the mill.

A middle-aged woman and two lads ran toward the mill's cottage as the door opened and a tall youth stumbled out, falling to his knees upon the ground.

Behind him stood a priest in a blood-spattered robe, and he held a bloodied dagger in his hand.

And then the lad lifted his head, and both Ewan and Julian gasped in unison.

It was Merry.

Leaping from their horses, they were at her side in an instant.

Ewan reached the man first, knocking the dagger out of his hand and shoving him back against the cottage wall as Julian pulled Merry to safety.

Grasping the priest roughly by the throat, Ewan stood there a moment, breathing heavily. He then kicked the man's dagger out of his reach.

Turning to Julian and Merry, he lifted a brow in silent question.

"She's unharmed," Julian answered, but his gaze had locked upon the man in Ewan's grasp. "Borthwick?" he asked, astonished.

Turning back, Ewan's eyes widened in surprise as he realized he knew the young man.

And then Merry's shocked voice came in short gasps, "'Tis the king. He slew the king. The king is dead!"

It was so astonishing that no one moved.

Even Borthwick.

And then the miller's wife ran into the cottage and began to scream as Julian followed. Dragging Borthwick in after him, Ewan ducked under the low door to see for himself.

A quick glance was enough.

“He’s dead,” Julian confirmed in a shocked tone, looking up from the bed. And then his fair features darkened, and striding to Borthwick, he spoke in a deep-pitched voice. “Ye rode under my banner. Ye knew well that the king’s blood was not to be spilt!”

“Aye,” Ewan rasped, glancing through the window to see Merry still crouched in the stable yard, pale and stunned, and with her hands clasped tightly over her mouth. “And would ye have the blood of an innocent lady upon your hands as well?”

“Lady?” Borthwick repeated, taken aback.

Ewan scowled and nodded his firm jaw in Merry’s direction. “The lad,” he corrected. “Did ye plan on slaying him because he witnessed your crime?”

“Nay,” the man replied quickly.

But it was a little too quickly for Ewan’s taste.

“I would see this traitor hung,” Ewan growled, his blue eyes locked with Julian’s.

“Traitor? Nay!” Borthwick’s face flushed red. “’Tis not so. I merely followed the order of the Earl of Angus. Speak to the man yourself if ye dinna believe me! This morn he pulled a handful of us aside and swore that Cameron himself had promised a princely reward to the man who would bring him the king’s head.”

“Lies!” Ewan spat, shoving the man back.

Borthwick fell to his knees. “I swear it, my lord!”

“Then we’ll ask Archibald, aye?” Julian inserted softly. “Even now, the man comes.”

And indeed it was so. Archibald, the Earl of Angus approached the mill on horseback with a few others trailing behind him.

And as they’d dismounted and had begun to speak heatedly of Borthwick and his illicit charter amidst the miller’s wife’s hysterical wailing, Ewan wiped the grime from his face and stepped outside to kneel next to Merry. He was exhausted, and he was far beyond astonished to find her there, but he was right glad that she was.

“’Tis done, lass,” he said gently, laying a comforting hand upon her shoulder.

She swallowed. Her face was still white, and her eyes filled with horror. “I saw him, Ewan,” she whispered numbly. “He just … he just…” she choked. “I couldn’t stop him. I didna know he was …”

“Dinna think on it,” he said. Gathering her closer into a one-armed hug, he rested his forehead against hers. “’Tis done. The man met his fate. There was naught ye could do, lass.”

“I should have stopped him,” she said, reaching up to grip his fingers tightly. “I thought he was a strange priest from the start—”

“Nay,” he said, cutting her short. And then rising to his feet, he pulled her up beside him. Placing a hand upon each of her shoulders,

he ordered, “Look at me, lass. The king’s death is not on your hands. The man brought about his own fate by his own foolishness. If ye had even *tried* to stop Borthwick, even now ye’d be lying dead upon the floor along with the king, and what is the good in that? That man’s evil doing is not your concern, lass.”

She was shaking, but she seemed to be listening.

“Nay, ye are supposed to live, Merry,” he continued in a gentler tone. “’Tis me ye have to finish saving, lass. You’re a remedy for my heart, and I need ye with me. I’m not saved yet.”

She drew in a long breath, and then she looked at him, as if noticing he were truly there for the first time.

“Ewan, are ye well? Have ye been hurt?” she gasped, searching his face.

And then she was running her hands along his bristled jaw, over his chest and thighs, clearly searching for wounds until he caged her within his arms and crushed her close to him.

“Am I dreaming?” she asked in a harsh whisper. “Are ye really here afore me, hale and hearty?”

“Aye, but mayhap I’m the one who is dreaming. I left ye in Cambuskenneth, did I not?” he asked teasingly. And then suddenly aware of just how much he was covered in other men’s blood, he let her go and pushed her away. “Ach, lass. I dinna want ye to see me like this. I’m fair unpresentable, and—”

But she only snorted and her brown eyes flashed. “I dinna smell so lovely in these stolen clothing myself, Ewan MacLean,” she said in a wavering voice.

And then grabbing onto him, she buried her face into his chest, and her shoulders began to shake as her breaths came in long, ragged gasps. It took him a moment to realize that she was weeping in long horrible sobs.

He let her cry for a time, resting his chin upon the top of her head while he watched Borthwick’s hands being tied with rope and then several of Archibald’s men led him away.

Ewan raised a brow.

Archibald would most likely see the man freed afore the king’s body had even left the cottage. And when Julian passed by him a short time later, he sent him a knowing glance. Clearly, he thought the same thing.

Then Ewan spied a flash of MacLeod plaid from the corner of his eye.

And Ruan’s voice asked grimly, “Are the both of ye unharmed?”

Ewan tensed to hear the man but glanced down at himself first. He suffered cuts in various places, and his arm burned in pain, but he was still standing, and that is what mattered the most after battle.

Hearing her brother's voice, Merry lifted her red-swollen eyes and wiped them with the back of her arm. The gesture tore Ewan's heart, and not caring if Ruan approved of him or no, he caught her chin with his thumb and forced her eyes to meet his.

"'Tis healing to weep, lass," he said with a gentle smile. "But soon, your eyes will weep no more, I swear it. This too, as all things, will end."

She nodded, the corner of her lip tremulously lifting into a smile.

Leaning over, he planted a kiss upon her forehead and then clenching his jaw, turned to face Ruan.

He'd expected to see a look of anger upon the man's face, but instead, his face was impassive, betraying nothing.

And then yet more of the prince's men arrived, and as plans were made to bear the king's body back to Cambuskenneth, Ruan looped his arm around Merry's shoulder and insisted she return with him at once to the abbey.

Lacing his hand through hers to kiss her fingertips, Ewan seated her safely upon Diabhul's back, quickly sidestepping the stallion as he reached back for a quick nip. And then she was gone, riding away at her brother's side.

The place seemed desolate after she left, but Ewan stayed with Julian and the others until a fine litter was brought, and the king's ermine-trimmed cloak, recovered, was laid upon the deceased monarch. Then in a solemn procession, they filed away from the mill, heading silently to the abbey.

Halfway there, Cameron galloped to join them along with a shaken prince.

The prince didn't speak as he maneuvered his horse to keep pace next to his father's litter, but Cameron urged his mount between Julian and Ewan's to speak in a low voice.

"Already, Archibald has lost Borthwick," he informed them grimly. "He claims the man attacked his guards and escaped on horseback."

"Aye, with Archibald's money and blessing." Julian heaved a sigh. "We'll never see the man again, I'll warrant."

Ewan clenched his jaw. He'd suspected as much.

Bowing his head, he let the remainder of their words wash over him, and instead, focused on thoughts of home.

He hadn't been to Mull in quite some time, longer than he cared to admit.

He missed the mountains, the lochs, and the barking of the selkies as they stretched out on the rocky islands. He closed his eyes. It had been years since he stood on the moors, watching the piercing winds lift the banks of fog as they rolled over the waves.

And then, there were his parents, especially his father. He'd not seen the old man in a disgraceful long while.

Aye, 'twas time to return.

The evening sun hovered on the horizon when they finally rode through Cambuskenneth's gate. The monks were there with bowed heads to receive the king's body, and it was with great respect that they carried him into the church, to lay him down in front of the alter.

The prince followed, pale and stoic.

He said nothing as he stood before his father's body wrapped in the fine ermine-trimmed mantle. And then slowly, he crossed himself and knelt, his lips moving in silent prayer.

Ewan stayed for only a short time before he moved to wait outside for the others to join him. He was exhausted. The pain in his arm had subsided to a dull ache, proving not to be caused by cuts but a deep bruise and most likely a torn muscle. It would heal with resting.

It was time for the day to end. He was ready.

Merry and Ruan were nowhere to be seen, and he wondered where they'd gone, but then thoughts of Ruan made him wonder what he could do to prove his worth to the man in order to win Merry's hand.

He glanced down at his blood-spattered clothes, the blood now brown, dried, and caked. 'Twas the last time he'd wear such clothes, and he suddenly wanted nothing more than to be rid of them as soon as he could.

Then as the last rays of sun turned the abbey a warm golden hue, Cameron and Julian stepped out from the chapel with the pale young prince between them.

Quickly, Cameron recounted the events that had transpired to cause the king's death, but noticeably he avoided details of Borthwick's name and escape.

Ewan supposed it wise. 'Twould likely start another war.

And then for the first time, the prince spoke. "And so it ends like so many stories before it. I am a son who has killed his own father for a crown," he whispered.

"Nay, my king," Cameron responded in a voice of strength. "The king's blood is not on your hands. He died at the hands of a traitor."

"Nay." The prince shook his head, and his lips twisted as he strove to contain his grief. "He died only because I rose against him. Had I stayed his faithful son, then even now he would be dining in yon castle." He tilted his head toward Stirling rising above them in the distance.

"There is no denying this is a tragic end," Cameron said grimly. He bowed his head and murmured. "Dinna forget that he was my cousin, your majesty. As wee lads, we sailed the River Forth and spent

many a day in laughter. Nevertheless, as much as it pains me to speak ill of one crossed over, Scotland did suffer by him. And we greatly need a wise and prudent king now—a king who is unwavering and just. The people have had enough suffering."

The prince fell silent for a moment, and then whispered, "Aye, the duty of a king. But as a son, I must pay the price, Cameron."

Cameron reached over and clasped his young cousin's shoulder in a gesture of comfort. "Then let the abbot guide ye on penance to ease your guilt if ye must," he suggested in a deep voice.

The prince lifted his head, seizing the word. "Penance," he repeated.

"But there is much we must do to secure the peace of the realm," Cameron continued. "The clans of the north must be dispersed home. We must secure your crown, your majesty, and—"

"Penance," the prince interrupted him with another whisper. "Never has a race of kings been more unfortunate than that of the Stewarts."

"Aye," Cameron agreed hesitantly, exchanging a concerned look with Julian.

"Then see to it that an iron cilice is made for me at once, Cameron," the young prince ordered, his voice growing stronger with each word. "And I will forever wear the heavy collar to remind me that I have sinned and that I must humbly seek penance for my soul, even though 'twas all for the sake of Scotland."

And then, the young prince turned upon his heel and strode away.

A hushed silence fell, finally to be broken by Julian's quiet voice. "A meek king," he murmured. "Dare I hope that such a man grows into a great king?"

"Aye," Cameron said, allowing himself a rare smile. "I have such hope myself, Julian."

They stayed as they were for a moment, until the scrape of boots against stone caused them to turn and to see Archibald Douglas.

"Ach, I fear that one James will be just as bad as the other," the redheaded Earl spat in greeting.

As Cameron and Julian stepped forward to take the man to task, Ewan used the opportunity to escape.

He had no desire to hear more. He was done with men and their games of power.

Aye, he would clean himself first, and then he would find Merry. But he'd scarcely stepped around the tower before soft hands slipped around his waist from behind, and he felt her head press against his back.

"I'm never letting ye go again, ye daft fool," she said, rubbing her cheek against his shoulders.

A slow smile curved his lips. Sliding his hands over hers, he unlocked them and turned to study her face in the gathering darkness.

She'd changed once again into the fine gown, and upon seeing just her face, the weariness that had threatened to consume him seemed to lift all at once.

His gaze roved over her in an intimate caress.

Ach, he wanted to kiss her, but he'd not hold her yet. Not with his blood-encrusted clothing and the sweat of battle still rank upon him.

"Will ye kiss me, Ewan MacLean?" she demanded then, her brown eyes inviting.

Slowly, he lowered his head to deliver the merest brush of his lips against her cheek.

But then he heard Ruan's hard voice behind him.

"And I thought I told ye 'twould be years afore I'd let ye kiss my wee sister, Ewan MacLean!" The man's voice was harsh.

"*Years?*" Merry burst in outrage, stepping aside to face her brother in shock.

Ewan glanced over his shoulder to see Ruan standing there with his arms crossed and his feet planted wide apart, and Cameron stood with narrowed eyes at his side.

"Aye," Ruan said, drawing his dark brows into a scowl that matched the one now upon Merry's face. "Do ye find years a wee bit too long?"

She rolled her eyes.

"Then what time would ye find acceptable?" her brother probed, the beginnings of a smile forming upon his carved lips.

"I would wed him tonight, if ye could but find a priest," Merry said with a mischievous gleam dancing in her dark eyes.

Ruan glanced around at the monks milling about the abbey grounds. "It shouldna be too hard, my wee Merry lass," he said with dry humor. "If ye truly insist."

"I do so truly insist," she answered firmly. "This very night."

"Then I will find a priest, as ye wish," her brother replied with a wide smile. "Within the hour."

Ewan shook his head to clear it and then interrupted, locking his gaze upon Ruan. "I find ye fair confusing, Ruan. How can ye have gone from years to an hour? I thought ye had to see with your own eyes what a changed man I am."

Ruan arched a dark brow. "And I have, lad," he said, chuckling a little. "I'm not a fool, and I know true love when I see it. 'Twas in the mill stable yard that I saw with my own eyes that the two of ye belong together like the wind on the moors."

Ewan's brows ascended in surprise.

"Then find a priest, Ruan—" Merry began.

“Nay,” Ewan cut her short, holding up his hand. “I’ve not asked ye yet, lass—”

“Ach, do ye think I’m of a mind to say nay?” she interrupted him in turn. Lowering her lashes, she asked, “Will ye hither to my side whenever I call ye for the rest of your days?”

“Aye,” he said, frowning a little. “But ‘tis I who should be doing the asking. And I would wait for a proper wedding. I willna wed ye in the clothes of battle—”

She reached up then and silenced him with a kiss. He shuddered at the delicate touch of her lips upon his and the soft teasing trace of her hand as it slid across his chest and dropped down the length of his arm.

Pulling her lips away, she nodded in satisfaction when he remained silent.

“You're outmatched, lad,” Cameron said then. “’Tis wise to give into your fate.”

Ruan simply threw his head back and laughed.

“Aye, then I’ll be wedding ye now, Ewan, this very hour,” Merry said, her dark eyes sparkling. “There will be plenty of time to attend feasts later. If you’re quick, I’m sure the monks can help ye find a tub and a fresh plaid.”

“Come, Ewan,” Ruan said with smiling eyes. “Ye have an hour. If ye wish, I’ll even help ye ride as far as ye can from this wee beastie. It seems I’ve erred, aye? ‘Tis ye I should worry for, lad.”

It happened quickly after that.

Within the hour, he’d scrubbed the battle grime away, revealing an array of bruises and small cuts. His arm was bound in order to aid in the healing of it, and at the last moment, Julian arrived with a fine linen shirt and a crisp MacLean plaid.

And then under a bright crescent moon above the rim of the horizon, Julian and Cameron escorted him to the side entrance of the chapel where a monk with white hair and dark bushy brows waited.

No one spoke.

They stood there in silence for a few minutes.

But when there was no sign yet of Merry, he began to wonder if she’d regretted her haste, but he’d scarce thought it when a loud crash rang through the night.

Swearing, Ewan whirled, his hand dropping to the hilt of his sword out of habit.

But it was only a priest who had dropped a candlestick on his way into the main chapel where the king lay in state.

“Ach, your warrior instincts are too ingrained in ye, lad,” Julian said with a soft laugh.

Ewan frowned and expelled a long breath. “I’ve grown weary of

the familiar scent of battle. My days of drawing the sword are done," he said, his tone resoundingly final. "From this moment on, I will live by the words: what ye can kill, ye can also save."

"Well said," Cameron commented, arching an elegant brow at him. "Then will I find ye joining me at court, lad?"

Ewan shook his head quickly. "Nay, I dinna plan to leave the Isles. I'll fill my days with other concerns now."

Returning home. He'd thought of it often, but now it would happen. In his mind's eyes, he saw his parent's astonished—and greatly pleased—faces upon discovering he hadn't returned home alone but in the company of his own wee wife, a lass he loved with his entire heart.

"Then methinks 'twill not be long afore I hear news that ye've produced an heir to the Earldom of Mull," Julian said with a low chuckle. "Your father will dance with joy."

And then the expression on Cameron's face caught Ewan's eye, a look of love and yearning. Following the earl's gaze, Ewan spied Kate moving toward them, but then all other thoughts fled as he caught sight of Ruan behind her with his arm looped through Merry's.

He could only watch as Merry glided toward him, a vision in a gold and moss-colored gown that clung to her curvaceous form in such a way that stole his breath. He stood there, drinking in every exquisite inch of her, from her slim white throat to the soft swell of her bosom rising from the voluminous skirts gathered about her waist.

And then Ruan placed her hand into his, and the priest began to speak, uttering words that bound them together for life.

But he scarcely heard the man.

He was lost in the mischievously dancing eyes of his soon-to-be wife.

And then it was done. She was his.

He stood there, entwining one hand with hers as he reverently twisted one of her short ebony curls around the fingers of the other. And then he bent his head, his lips hovering a scant inch above hers for a moment before closing the distance in a warm, eager kiss. He could have tasted the sweet softness of her lips for an eternity, and it took every shred of his remaining strength to finally tear his mouth away from hers.

Cameron was then shooing them to the waiting horses, and they all mounted for the short journey back to the castle. Ewan rode in silence, overwhelmed by the events of the day.

He was fair exhausted in both body and mind. But the moment Merry's hand clasped over his to lead him up the dark winding stairs of Castle Stirling to their assigned chamber, his weariness began to fade and his heart grew lighter with each step.

And by the time they'd reached the chamber door, he found his lips smiling as he swept her up into his arms. Kicking the door open, he carried her inside.

The chamber was a welcoming one, a large curtained bed stood in the center with a fine brocade cover. A crackling fire burned on the hearth and near it stood a table laden with wine and platters filled with things he didn't really care about at the moment.

Pulling her to his chest, he wrapped his arms around her tightly and buried his face into her hair.

At long last, she was his.

He could scarce believe it.

Slowly, he slid his palm down her back and then up to her neck before moving a finger to lightly trace her collarbone.

Her long lashes dropped then, and he moved to nuzzle her behind her ear. He was rewarded by a soft, fragile moan escaping her lips that made him smile even as his blood began to heat.

Dropping his hands to linger on the curve of her hip, he claimed her in a kiss, reveling in the sweetest torment of her lips.

She responded by sliding her hands beneath his shirt and running her fingers across his chest. Her touch was light and airy, maddeningly so, as her hands splayed across the expanse of his chest in a way that burned his skin even more.

He kissed her throat then, tilting her back and tasting her soft skin that only made him ache to feel her bare flesh against his.

'Twas nigh impossible to resist the urge to rip her fine dress right off and to ravish every inch of her skin with his lips.

And then she tossed her head of ebony curls, lifting her brows ever so slightly in a teasing challenge.

It was his undoing.

Grasping the fabric of her bodice tightly in his hands, he heard the cloth rip and the gown ballooned softly to the floor to pool at her feet. She leaned into him then, placing one hand upon his chest, and then with a primal growl, he caught her in his arms and carried her to the bed.

* * *

Merry woke up to an arm holding her firmly in place. She smiled at Ewan's blond head buried in the pillows next to her, eyes closed, and with his other arm arched gracefully above his head.

Sliding out from under his hold, she peered at his chiseled chest and frowned. The collection of bruises, cuts, and quite a few faded scars stood out as a testament to the dangerous life he had lived.

Had lived.

She'd see to it that the most dangerous thing he did from that moment onward would be to spend his evenings in her bed. Aye, and

such a thing would be dangerous indeed. He would be in severe danger of never leaving her side.

He was breathing slowly, peacefully, signaling he still slept.

She didn't mind. It afforded her the opportunity to stare at him as much as she pleased.

Softly, she ran her finger an inch over the firm line of his jaw and softly whispered a vow, "The only blade I'll see ye raise, Ewan MacLean, is a razor to shave your beard."

He startled her with a low chuckle.

The sound was astonishing, not only because she was surprised to discover him awake, but mostly because it made her realize that she hadn't heard him laugh in such a light-heartedly pleasant way since she was a wee lassie and he'd arrived as a gangly lad at Dunvegan.

"And how are ye awake so soon, lass?" he asked in a voice roughened by sleep. "I must not have honored my husbandly duties properly last night, aye?"

In a flash, he'd rolled his taut body on top of her and looked down into her eyes with a glance that was warm and possessive.

"Last night was a wee bit of a blur," Merry murmured, sliding her hands up his chest.

"Do ye need to be reminded then?" he asked with a self-satisfied smile.

She laughed then. "Ach, ye men are too easy to lead about by the nose—" she began.

But he silenced her with a kiss. And then his hot mouth was on her skin once more, eliciting exquisite sensations as they surrendered to unfettered passion.

* * *

It was several days later, after the northern clans had been routed home and the newly made king had retired to Edinburgh, that Ruan, Merry, and Ewan bade their farewells.

It was time to return to the Isles.

Ruan had decided to ride with them to Mull first, before returning home to Skye, and so on a particularly bright summer morning, they readied their horses in Stirling's stables.

Patting his horse on the rump, Ewan had just reached down to adjust the cinch of his saddle when he heard a horse's snuffle from behind and felt a hard push on his shoulder.

He dove just before the teeth snapped.

Whirling on his heel, he could only eye Diabhul in wonder and ask his bride, "Do ye think he'll ever forgive me, Merry?"

Merry stepped around the horse's great rump and sent him a warm smile. "He gave ye one chance, Ewan, and ye betrayed him. I dinna think ye'll get another."

“Mayhap. But there is still time,” Ewan murmured with a smile. Turning to the horse, he lowered his voice, “Lad, I understand ye better than ye think. We just need to find ye a high-spirited lassie who can lighten that heavy heart of yours and then we’ll see ye frolicking on the moors, aye?”

“Frolicking on the moors?” Merry asked then, lowering her lashes. And then she drew his head down and whispered in his ear, “If ye were to frolic on the moors, Ewan, would it be with or without your plaid?”

He looked down at her then, allowing his eyes to drift lazily over her soft curves.

Aye, she was an incredible lass.

Pulling her close, he delivered a gentle kiss on the side of her neck.

And then she smacked him on the side of the head. A soft smack, one that ended with her fingers threading through his hair.

“We must be leaving, ye daft fool,” she murmured, pressing against him in a manner that threatened only to ensure the fact that they wouldn’t be leaving at all.

“Enough of that, the two of ye,” Ruan called from over his shoulder. “We’ve miles to ride.”

They pulled apart, slightly embarrassed and then sweeping Merry off her feet, Ewan tossed her onto Diabhul’s back. And then pausing only long enough to tie the reins of his own horse to Diabhul’s saddle, he swung himself up behind her.

“I’ll not ride alone,” he whispered in her ear.

Diabhul stamped his foot, but with Merry riding upon him, that was the end of his resistance.

Then wrapping his arms tightly around Merry’s waist, Ewan galloped after Ruan under Stirling Castle’s gates and down Castle Hill’s winding cobblestoned lanes for the last time and headed across the fields for the highlands rippling across the horizon.

Taking a northerly road, they ran their horses over the swelling and falling moorlands with the scent of damp heather filling the air. The miles passed, and they rode long into the day, traveling across fields of upland flowers and through stands of birch growing on the shores of the narrow, winding lochs.

But Ewan scarcely noticed the time.

His heart was light and warm, unencumbered by thoughts of war, and he had his bride in his arms. Leaning down, he buried his face in her ebony curls. She responded at once by pressing back against his chest to nestle her head against the curve of his neck.

He cradled her closer. Aye, they belonged together. They had from the very start.

Epilogue

Ewan lounged back in his chair and stretched his long legs out before the warm crackling fire in Duart Castle's hall. It had been a few months short of a year since he'd returned to the MacLean family stronghold, which perched like an eagle on the high cliffs of Mull.

This spring evening was a particularly lazy one in the immense stone keep.

In the corner, the minstrel strummed softly upon his lute. The evening meal had just been served, and even though the enticing scents of rosemary-roasted meat pervaded the air, Merry and his father still sat by the window, oblivious to the fact the food was growing cold.

His parents had instantly fallen in love with Merry when he'd first brought her home. As she had with them. But the bond she'd formed with his father was a particularly close one, and she spent many hours by his side, listening to his never-ending hoard of tales regarding Mull's fairy and witch folk.

And this evening, Merry was once again enthralled as his father regaled her with yet another tale of Cailleach Bheur, the divine hag of Mull.

Ewan didn't mind waiting.

He quite enjoyed letting his eyes travel slowly over her lithe form, lingering especially often upon the soft growing swell of their unborn child.

Then a scuffle at the far entrance to the hall drew his sharp blue eyes.

But it only proved to be Lothar.

Spying the saddle upon the huge Frank's shoulder, Ewan smiled at once, seeing that the man's undertaking had been a successful one.

From across the hall, Lothar lifted his arm in greeting, no longer minding that he'd lost his hand, but then Ewan knew that his fiery wife had much to do with that. At Hermitage, the man had fallen deeply in love with the redheaded maid who had nursed him back to health. And they'd settled in Mull several months ago and would soon be having a wee bairn of their own.

After planting a kiss on his wife's cheek as well as her expectant belly with a gentleness at odds with his fearsome demeanor, Lothar strode toward the high table, the saddle still balanced upon his shoulder.

Tossing the remainder of his wine down his throat, Ewan rose to his feet to greet the approaching Frank.

"Success," the man announced simply, dumping the saddle onto

the high table next to the platter of fish and venison.

Ewan eyed it in appreciation.

It truly was artfully wrought, a fine work of leather and silver thread.

And then he heard Merry's gasp near his shoulder and smiling, he turned to see her standing there with her jaw dropping open in recognition.

"My saddle!" she gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. "The one I sold to save ye from prison! Wherever did ye get it?"

"It took a bit of doing to find it." Lothar laughed.

And as the once-silent man so spare with words settled back to revel in telling the tale of his journey, Merry slipped her hand through Ewan's and pulled him out of the hall and into their chamber but a few steps away.

Once inside, she slipped her arms around his neck and burrowed as close as she could. "I canna believe ye've been searching for it this entire time," she said in a husky voice. "Now I'm fair tempted to ride."

"Nay," Ewan chuckled, patting her belly bumping into him. "Ye have the bairn to think of, lass."

"Aye, I know. I only said I was *tempted*, ye daft fool," she said, reaching up to pinch his nose. And then her eyes took on a devilish look. "Since I canna ride until after the bairn comes, mayhap I would see *ye* ride Diabhul in my stead."

Ewan frowned. "Ye know quite well that I'm not going anywhere near that horse. I've come to realize that he *is* the devil."

He'd long given up any ideas of making peace with the beast.

"Ach, now, would ye disappoint your wee wife?" Merry asked, planting her hands upon her hips.

"Wee?" Ewan raised a differing brow. "There are only a handful of men on the Isle that ye dinna tower over and well ye know it."

"Aye, but to ye I'm wee, aye?" she asked with an impish flutter of her lashes.

"Aye, 'tis true enough," he admitted, sweeping her close into his arms. "But I can think of better things to do than risk my life riding that devil of a horse for your amusement."

And then lowering his lips, he kissed her hungrily.

"Aye," she murmured in agreement, threading her fingers in his hair. "I suppose I can wait an hour to see ye ride him."

The End

Heather House: Witch of the Moors

North Berwick, Scotland
1590

Alec Montgomery threw his head back and laughed, his green eyes twinkling in mirth.

"Ach, Taran, ye sound like Old Bertha," he quipped, looking down his aristocratic high-bridged nose. "What was it she said?"

He slammed his tankard down with a crash and grinned as his tall, dark-haired cousin greeted his display with a scathing glance.

"Ah yes." Alec ignored the stare and continued, shifting into a storyteller's voice. "She swore I was cursed for dying with the name of the wrong lass upon my lips nigh on a hundred years ago. And because of it, my true love is now mine enemy." His handsome face creased into an even wider grin as he ran his hands through his sun-burnished hair. "*And an enemy that I could lose my life for in rescuing her from the flames.* What sense does that make, aye? The woman is mad."

His brooding cousin curled the corner of his lip in disdain. "And what has that to do with me?"

Staring directly into the man's unnerving gaze, Alec wriggled both brows and whispered loud enough so that all could hear, "Ye *both* are mad."

But then the wench perched upon his knee stood up with a scowl. "Did ye not hear about Old Bertha? They burnt her as a witch a fortnight ago!"

Alec cocked a surprised brow her way.

Old Bertha was daft, but she'd been a harmless old woman. Who could possibly think her capable of witchcraft?

The conversation lulled, but then Alec's younger brother ducked inside the alehouse and strode their way, his plaid-draped shoulder stiff with anger.

"Ach, the lot of them are fools!" he spat, lifting a booted foot over the bench to join his kin. "'Tis not highwaymen lurking along the road launching attacks on the unwary. 'Tis the Cunninghams and well all know it!"

As usual, the name of *Cunningham* shifted the mood.

"Aye, not a Cunningham exists whom I'd allow to walk upon the Earth, if I had my way," Alec said without hesitation. "Useless, the lot of them."

"Ach, have ye brought new tidings?" Taran asked with a note of scorn. "Or is this merely an opining of the same blood grudge that's

lasted nigh on a hundred years?"

The younger Montgomery opened his mouth, but whatever he was about to say was lost upon Alec as the door to the alehouse opened once again, this time revealing a lass at the threshold.

She arrested his attention at once.

Slim and delicate with a mane of coppery curls, she wore a homespun blue dress that accentuated her stunning blue eyes, eyes that seemed to bore deep into his soul. But then she moved, and he couldn't make up his mind if her eyes were instead gray, or mayhap green.

She began to move his way.

Tilting his head toward his brother and cousin, he queried in a low tone, "The lass coming our way. Do we know her?"

"With as many lasses as ye kiss, Alec, I'd say ye do," his cousin observed with a sardonic crook of his lip.

But Alec only had time to toss him an exasperated glance before the lass was there at the table.

She was quite delicate and a bit younger than he'd first thought.

And her eyes, aye, her eyes. Her eyes seemed to shimmer from blue to green as the flicker of the candlelight struck them. Or mayhap it was the anger in them that caused them to shift color.

With a proud toss of her head, she slapped her hand down upon the table. "Ye owe me a debt, Montgomery."

"I do?" Alec asked with an easy grin. His eyes swept her up and down in outright appraisal. "Forgive me, but I canna recall ye, lass, though I'm fair flummoxed how I ever could forget ye."

She pushed a silver pin across the table, and the three leaned close to inspect it.

Alec raised a questioning brow.

There was nothing particularly special about the pin but for the fact that it was the Montgomery crest.

He shrugged, and then sent her his most seductive smile. "The pin means naught to me, but I canna say the same about your lips, lass."

Her eyes flashed and her bosom heaved.

But before she could respond, a bald man wearing a dark cloak opened the alehouse door.

At once, the lass dove upon Alec's lap and pulled the corner of his plaid over her shoulders.

He had no objection. She was frail and slight, but deliciously curved in all of the right places.

He slid his hand around her waist and pulled her even closer.

"Has any of ye seen an odd redheaded lass with uncanny eyes?" The bald man's voice reverberated throughout the low-ceiling room.

Several heads turned their way, and the lass dropped her hands to

grip Alec's hard.

He froze, startled, and glanced down at her fingers resting atop his. Her hands were delicate and warm.

And strangely, inexplicably familiar.

Perplexed, he looked deeply into her mysterious, ringed eyes and then asked a bit chagrined, "Ach, have I bedded ye afore?"

If he hadn't, he knew he certainly would.

She answered him with a swift kick to the shin.

"Her name is Sorcha," the man approached them, his voice continuing to shake the alehouse rafters. "She's a witch. A Cunningham witch!"

… to be continued in "Heather House: Witch of the Moors"

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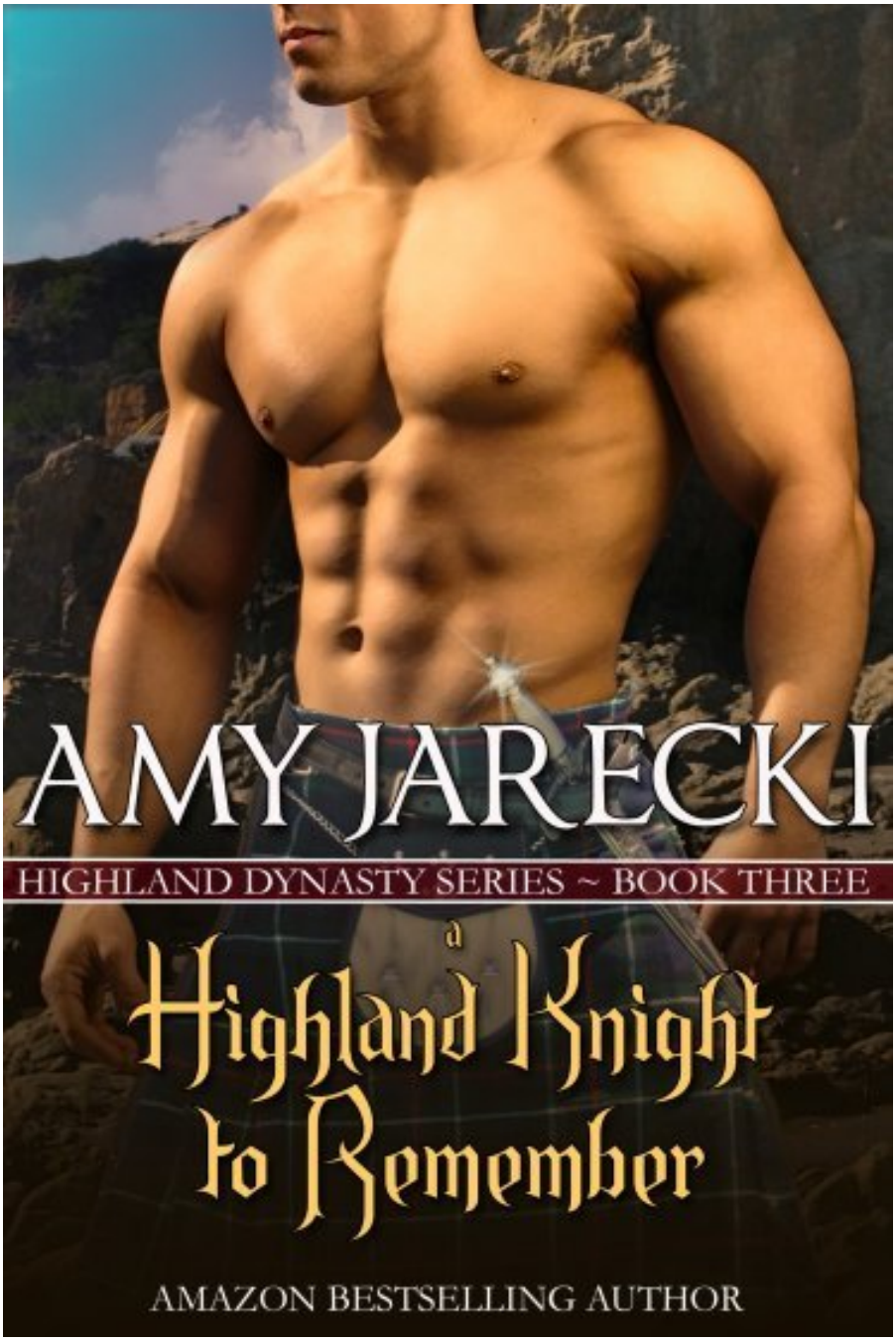
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Like many of us on this planet, Carmen Caine is from another world. She spends every moment she can scribbling stories on sticky notes that her kids find posted all over the car, house, and barn.

When she is not working as a software engineer, she is busy ferrying her kids to various appointments, writing lyrics for her husband's songs, taking care of the dog Tigger and his heart condition, attempting to tame her three insane cats, scratching her three Nigerian Dwarf Goats behind the horns or coddling her flock of thirty bizarre chickens from around the world.

The "Glass Wall" is the first book of her new paranormal series about Ancient Beings, Tulpas and different dimensions.

Carmen would love to have you as a friend http://www.facebook.com/Carmen.Caine.


AMY JARECKI
HIGHLAND DYNASTY SERIES ~ BOOK THREE
a Highland Knight to Remember
AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A Highland Knight to Remember

Highland Dynasty Series—Book Three

by

Amy Jarecki

~Scottish Historical Romance~

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Chapter One

The Scottish Highlands, Late Fifteenth Century

Gyllis Campbell forgot the pain in her backside when Dunstaffnage Castle came into view. It was all she could do not to dig in her heels, slap her riding crop against her mare's rump and overtake their dreary entourage. But Mother would surely admonish such a display of unladylike exuberance.

In the castle foreground, blue and white striped tents festooned with colorful flags flapped in the breeze. The sight made butterflies flit about her stomach. If only she could hop off her horse, she'd be able to walk faster than the guards leading them. Gyllis had been looking forward to the annual Highland fete for ages. At long last they'd arrived and the rain had stopped. It would be Beltane on the morrow —May Day. And it couldn't possibly rain on the opening day of the games.

Gyllis cast an excited grin toward her sister. "What is the first thing you plan to do?"

Helen licked her lips. "I can already smell the honeyed cryspes."

Food?

Though only a year younger, Helen could be incredibly dull. She even opted to wear a veil and cover her lovely honey-colored locks, though she was a maid and within her rights to flaunt her beautiful tresses. "Sounds delicious," Gyllis managed a disinterested reply. She set her sights on more interesting fare and scanned the scene for Highland warriors. *Where is he?*

"And you?" Helen asked.

"Hmm?" Gyllis focused on a gathering of well-armed knights ahead. *No handsome lad with a head of thick dark locks among them*. She could picture Sir Sean MacDougall in her mind's eye as if she'd seen him only yesterday. She adored everything about the knight including his long, athletic legs she'd admired many times when he sparred in the courtyard as one of her brother's Highland Enforcers. A potent and powerful man, Sir Sean's face was as equally rugged and handsome as his form. It had been six months since she'd last seen him before he left to patrol the borders. But forever burned into her memory was the way his azure eyes had stared at her from across the table during last year's Beltane festival. No man had ever gazed upon her with such fervent hunger. More so, his stare had awakened a longing deep within Gyllis's soul that would not be forgotten.

"What will be the first thing you'll do, silly?" Helen asked again.

Gyllis waggled her brows. "I want to watch the games."

“But they do not start until the morrow.” Helen tsked her tongue. “Bless it, you are incorrigible.” She leaned toward Gyllis. “I know what you’re doing.”

“So?” she snorted. “Eoin will be here, too.”

Helen whipped her head around so fast, she nearly fell off her mount. “Wheesht. Ma will hear you.”

Gyllis glanced over her shoulder at her mother and younger twin sisters. Bogle’s bones, she and the lassies would all need to find husbands soon. She had long past attained the age of twenty. Many highborn lasses were wed by ten and six—the same age as Alice and Marion. Yet her brother, the all-powerful and domineering Lord of Glenorchy, frowned upon every available noble who passed through Kilchurn Castle’s gates. Well, Gyllis had decided it was time to take matters into her own hands, lest she end up a spinster. If her brother deemed no one suitable to place a ring on her finger, she would follow her heart—a love interest she had harbored for years.

“Gyllis?” The commanding tone in Mother’s voice made her sit straighter. “Have you seen Duncan?”

I’d prefer it if my overbearing brother remained on the borders. “Not as of yet.”

“His missive said he would meet us at the gate.”

Gyllis eyed the barbican and the long pathway leading to Dunstaffnage’s immense grey stone walls. “Perhaps we shall see him when our entourage proceeds closer to the castle.”

“Can we not stop and look at the wares first?” asked Alice, Gyllis’s youngest sister—aside from Marion who was born moments later.

Mother cleared her throat. “No one will be doing any browsing at the fete until we are settled in our rooms.”

Gyllis rolled her eyes to the sky. “The servants will see to that. We’ll be in their way.”

“Oh?” Mother said. “And how will you know where you’ll be sleeping?”

Gyllis grinned at Helen. “You can tell us, Ma.”

“Ungrateful children,” Mother sighed. “It shan’t take long. Together we will proceed to our rooms and I’ll hear no further argument.”

With a wink, Gyllis leaned toward her sister and whispered, “You’ll have to wait a wee bit longer for those honeyed cryspes.”

“And you must put off ogling Sir Sean.”

Her heart fluttered at the mention of *his* name. She flicked her riding crop at Helen. “I’ll wager you’ll be dancing with Sir Eoin MacGregor this eve.”

Helen grasped the crop and yanked it from Gyllis’s hand. “You are shameless.”

“And you are ungrateful.” Gyllis snatched the whip back. “Remember, I am the one who intends to keep the Campbell sisters from spinsterhood.”

Sean MacDougall left his horse with his squire and removed his helm. He inhaled a deep breath of Highland air. The sweet scent of home enlivened him. He’d been looking forward to the Beltane games as he did every year and now even more so.

After spending six months patrolling the borders with the Highland Enforcers, he needed clean air and good sport. He scrubbed his knuckles against his scalp and marched from the stables toward the smell of roasting meat.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry, nephew?”

Sean stopped on the path leading to the castle’s main gate and turned. He’d recognize his uncle’s timeworn scowl anywhere. “If it isn’t the Lord of Lorn, himself.” He held out his hand for a firm handshake. “I see you’ve outdone yourself this year. The collection of merchants is grander than ever before.” Indeed, the tents sprawled across Dunstaffnage’s foreground posed an impressive sight.

Lorn chuckled—though not a tall man, he had a deep voice. “We do bring in more tinkers every year.” He rubbed the tips of his fingers together. “And with it comes more coin—as long as they can keep their thieving hands to themselves.”

In the past six months, Sean had endured enough of backstabbers and thieves to last a lifetime. At times he’d reckoned fate must have doled him out a parcel of bad luck. But he aimed to rectify his lot starting now. “I wish you well controlling the roustabouts. I’m here for the games.”

“I would assume no less.” Lorn chuckled and squeezed his arm. “And I expect you to be victorious—I’ve wagered a nicely sum upon it.”

Sean grinned. “I aim to give it my best.”

“Good lad.” Lorn smoothed his fingers down his grey, pointed beard. “I haven’t seen the Laird of Dunollie as of late. Will he be dining at the high table with me this eve?”

“Unfortunately, Da needs rest. He was a wee bit fevered last eve, but I expect him to come round before the end of the games.”

“Very well.”

Above the crowd ahead, Duncan Campbell climbed the steps leading to Dunstaffnage’s inner barbican. Sean waved and Duncan offered an exaggerated bow, his black hair dropping into his eyes. They’d been friends since the age of ten and four when Sean’s father sent him to Kilchurn Castle to foster with the late Lord of Glenorchy, Duncan’s da.

“Are you still riding with that Campbell blackguard?” Lorn asked.

Sean raised an eyebrow. “You surprise me, Uncle. Duncan is one of my closest allies.”

“I’d watch my back with friends such as he.”

“It would be in our best interest if we Highlanders could manage to end our feuds.”

Lorn scrunched his nose as if he’d just tasted a bitter brew. “’Tis easy for you to say, but I must find some way of keeping Campbell fingers off my title when I’m laid to rest. To my chagrin, my sister off and married the Earl of Argyll—if I pass without issue, the title will go to him, the bastard.”

Sean regarded his uncle. Blood ran thick in the Highlands, but he cared not to taint it with hatred for friends. He thumped him on the shoulder. “You can always marry Dugald’s mother and legitimize your son. That should solve all your woes.”

“But marrying so far beneath my station would cause consternation at court,” Lorn growled, drawing his thick brows together. “If only I had a legitimate heir like your father.”

Sean headed off with a chuckle. “You must start on that, uncle—before you’re too old to get a rise out of your cock.”

Lorn fell in step beside him. “Insolent lad. You should talk—how old are you now? Nine and twenty?”

“Aye.” Sean had never thought about aging, but the way Lorn said it, he already had one foot in the grave.

“You’d best be sowing your seed soon, else you’ll find yourself in a similar predicament.” Lorn jabbed his elbow into Sean’s ribs. “There’s no better time to find a ripe lassie than Beltane. You ken the legends.”

“Ballocks to that.” Sean slapped a dismissive hand through the air. “I’m off to fill my belly and enjoy the sweet Highland air. I’ve plenty of time to worry about marriage *after* the games.”

Having had about all he could take of his uncle’s babble, Sean raced ahead and followed Lord Duncan through the gatehouse. The inner courtyard was filled with nobles dressed in brightly colored blues, yellows, and more red velvet than he’d ever seen outside of court. A tall man, it wasn’t difficult for Sean to push through the crowd, straight into the castle’s tapestry-lined great hall. The smell of roasting meat and baking bread made his mouth water and his stomach growl.

From the high table, Duncan stood and beckoned him. “We’re not too late for our nooning.”

“Thank the good Lord for small mercies.” Sean slid into the seat beside the baron. “And where is your wife?”

“Lady Meg opted to remain at Kilchurn with the bairns. The wee ones are still too young to travel.”

Sean reached for a ewer and poured himself a tankard of ale. “And how are the twins?”

“Elizabeth has a healthy set of pipes for certain—though her brother Colin can hold his own.”

“Was the birth worth returning from the borders early?”

Duncan bit off a chunk of bread and winked. “I’ll say. Bloody miserable reiving thieves I can live without. A turn at home did me some good as well.”

A servant placed a trencher of chicken on the table and Sean swiped a leg. “And Lady Meg, has she recovered from the birth?”

“Aye, she’s as feisty as ever.”

Sean laughed. He’d never forget the night they stole Duncan away from Edinburgh gaol. They were riding like hellfire when Sean realized someone had followed them. He’d set a trap and nearly killed Lady Meg before she uttered a word. If it weren’t for her shrill scream, Sean probably would have run her through. He still shuddered at how close she’d come to meeting her end. *Feisty and fearless*.

High-pitched giggles across the hall pulled Sean from his thoughts. A lovely picture indeed. Gyllis Campbell and her sisters gaily flitted into the hall as if a ray of sunshine had brightened the entire room. Sean stopped mid-chew. It had been quite some time since he’d seen Gyllis. “God’s teeth.”

“What?” Duncan asked.

Sean swallowed as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Tall with willowy limbs, Gyllis had always reminded Sean of a meadow nymph. Chestnut locks framed porcelain skin and her moss-green eyes encircled by rings of black could captivate any man. “Your sister grows more radiant every time I see her.”

“Which one?”

Bloody hell, Duncan knew. Sean gripped his tankard and took a long pull on his ale. “I suppose Highland lassies are more appealing after a man’s taken a turn in the Lowlands.”

“Aye?” Duncan frowned. “Well, nothing’s changed. Friends and sisters do not mix—*Lusty Laddie*, you’ve tainted my opinion by all the womanizing we did as lads. Bloody oath, you’ll never put those lecherous hands on one of my sisters. You may be the best man I know with a sword.” Duncan glanced at Sean’s crotch. “And I’m referring to the one you carry on your hip. Pray you keep that in mind over the next few days.”

True, Sean liked the ladies as much as the next man—mayhap better—and he’d earned the moniker Lusty Laddie, but it appeared Duncan had forgotten his own wayward womanizing. Those carefree days hadn’t been all that long ago. Sean cleared his throat.

Gyllis caught Sean’s eye and stopped mid-stride. She pursed her

pouty lips as if gasping. Then she smiled and fluttered a wave. The corner of Sean's mouth turned up like a simpleton.

"MacDougall?" Duncan jabbed him with an elbow.

Sean glanced at his friend. "How do you recommend I react? Pretend your sister doesn't exist?"

"Aye, that's exactly what you should do."

"There's nothing wrong with a little healthy admiration. Besides, I'll be heading back to the borders in a fortnight, thanks to you." Sean bit down and tore a piece of meat from his chicken leg. "How have you fared finding a match for each of your *four* sisters?"

"Wheesht." Duncan eyed him. "That is none of your concern."

"Too right. And as I recall, *you* lifted lassies' skirts first and asked their names after." Sean picked up his tankard and guzzled it. Christ almighty, he didn't come to the games to flirt with some bonny lass deemed too good for him due to his friendship with her brother. Nay, it mattered not that he was to inherit the Chieftainship of Dunollie. Nothing Sean could say would make a difference to Duncan Campbell, the Lord of Glenorchy, unless he agreed that his sisters all marry above their stations.

He swallowed and glanced up. Then he nearly spewed his ale across the table. Bloody hell, Miss Gyllis stood opposite him, looking more radiant than she had at the far end of the hall.

"Good afternoon, Sir Sean," she said with a smile and a curtsey. "'Tis lovely to see you at the games again this year."

Must the temptress sound like a heavenly angel?

Sean's chair scraped the floor as he hastened to stand. Then the flimsy piece of furniture clattered to the floorboards. "Miss Gyllis, how delightful to see you." Bowing, he feigned his best attempt at nonchalance, ignoring the toppled chair behind.

The lassies around her giggled.

Sean bowed again. "Ah…All of you." He grinned at Gyllis like he was still wet behind the ears.

"Take a seat and eat or be gone the lot of you," Duncan said. "Pick up your chair MacDougall. Bless it, you act like you've never seen a lassie before."

"Pardon me, ladies." Sean hoped to God he hadn't turned red and stooped to right his seat. "It has been several months since I had the pleasure of such fair company." He raised an eyebrow at Duncan, the bastard. He might be a close friend, but he was a complete arse when it came to his sisters.

"We've already dined." Helen tugged Gyllis's arm. "Come. I'm dying to see all the wares on display."

"A moment." Gyllis smiled, looking sultrier than any young maid ought. "Will you be at the feast tonight, Sir Sean?"

"Aye."

She blessed him with a radiant smile. "Will you dance with me?"

"Gyllis." Duncan rapped the butt end of his eating knife on the table. "It is not your place to ask a knight to dance."

Sean would have liked to grasp her hand across the table, but the blasted board was too wide. He settled for a deep bow. "It would be my pleasure, Miss Gyllis."

"I shall see you this eve then." She dipped her head politely before being steered off the dais by her sisters.

Her tresses hung down her back in waves and swished across her shapely hips. Even with layers of skirts, her feminine form enticed. Sean rubbed his fingers together, imagining her hair to be finer than silk. No other lass in the hall came close to Gyllis Campbell's beauty. Unfortunate. If Sean had a mind to court anyone, it would be she. But the Lord of Glenorchy sitting beside him would ensure things never progressed that far.

Duncan pointed to the trencher. "Are you planning to eat that?"

"Huh?"

"The breast." Duncan reached across and snatched the last piece of chicken. "Are you entering all-around, or are you specializing this year?"

Sean's shoulder ticked up. "No use being here without going for a chance to win the purse."

"I thought as much."

"You as well?"

"Aye, as long as I'm here keeping an eye on your uncle for my uncle, I may as well enjoy myself."

Sean chuckled. "Lorn and Argyll—the age-old feud. By rights we should be fierce enemies."

"If it was up to our betters we would be." Duncan shoved the last bite of chicken into his mouth. "Thank God my father saw the benefit of uniting the clans. No one in Scotland can match the enforcers."

Sean held up his tankard. "And so may we continue to keep the peace."

Duncan raised his cup and tapped it to Sean's. "*Slàinte*."

"*Slàinte*."

Sean glanced toward the doors. Every muscle in his back clenched. That damned Alan MacCoul had Gyllis's hand clasped between his filthy mitts. Worse, she was smiling at him, giggling even. Her voice rang out above the hum of the crowd.

He grasped his chair's armrests, ready to spring, watching the bastard bend at the waist and plant a kiss on the back of her hand. Gyllis nodded politely, just as she had done to Sean a few moments ago.

Duncan sat forward. “What’s that slithering snake doing?”

Sean shot him a sidewise glance. “Proving he’s an unmitigated arse. Unfortunately, he’s a member of my clan. I shall deal with his impertinence.” Sean pushed back his chair, but by the time he strode to the dais stairs, Alan MacCoul had already shoved through the crowd as if he were planning to dine at the high table.

He traipsed directly to the base of the steps. “MacDougall, I thought I’d find you near the food.”

“’Tis a common place to gather at the noon hour.” Sean failed to understand why Alan had always been able to skate by with his impertinence. Even when they were lads Alan had been a bully—and older to boot. Sean would turn up with a black eye or worse, and the Chieftain of Dunollie would grab Sean’s chin and pinch. Hard. “A little bullying will make you strong, son. Next time Alan challenges you, stand your ground—prove to me you’re worthy to be chieftain.”

Well, that had been close to impossible when they were lads, given three years difference in age. However, now that they were grown, it was another story. Sean stood a good hand taller than Alan, and fighting the weasel would provide no sport whatsoever.

Alan didn’t try to mount the steps to the dais, but Sean could have sworn he caught a covetous glint in his eye.

The slithering snake smirked. “I’m surprised to see you here with news of your father’s illness.”

Sean knit his brows. He’d only had a fleeting moment with Da prior to departing for the games. He’d been home long enough to gather fresh clothing. Aside from a fever, Da had a cough, but dismissed it as a passing ailment. What more did Alan know? The bastard always had his nose in the family’s affairs. Why, Sean wouldn’t be surprised if he’d served his father with a tincture that had made him sick. “Da said he’d be along in a day or two.” Sean shrugged. “But ’tis no concern of yours.”

Alan’s eyes grew dark.

Duncan moved in beside Sean. “State your business, MacCoul, then I suggest you head further down the hall and sit with your own kind.”

The shorter, but stocky man sneered. “Just came up to tell Sir Sean I aim to win the tournament this year.”

Duncan threw his head back with a deep, rumbling laugh.

But Sean clenched his fists. If the hall weren’t full of women and children, he’d gladly challenge the errant scourge to a duel of swords. *Now isn’t the time*. “Well then, it will be my privilege to hand you the purse should you be victorious.” He’d meant it as a jibe and it sounded so.

“That would give me great satisfaction—though I believe I’d prefer the gift to come from the Lord of Lorn’s hand. After all, he’s an earl.”

Duncan clapped Sean's shoulder. "Come. Lady Meg gave me a list of items to purchase at the fete. I could use a hand."

Alan blocked the stairs, the corner of his mouth turned up in a smirk. "Two knights heading out on a woman's errand?"

Sean clambered down and stood on the bottom step, towering over the cur. "A knight's code of chivalry is something *you* would know nothing about."

Duncan barreled down and pushed past Alan's shoulder. "Come MacDougall, we've no time to wag tongues with a sniveling whoreson."

Sean gave Alan one last glare—narrowed his eyes so he'd know this wasn't over. Perhaps it was a good thing he'd have the chance to beat Alan MacCoul in the games. He'd issue the smug toad some long-awaited humble pie.

Chapter Two

For the first evening feast of Beltane, Gyllis sat in the great hall with her sisters wearing a green damask kirtle and matching veil, held in place by a bronze circlet. All the lasses were dressed to astound—one thing Mother never failed to impress upon the Campbell sisters—*Clothes maketh the lady*. Gyllis did not admire fine gowns as much as Ma, but she couldn't discount the fact that a noblewoman's dress indeed was important to society.

Mother and Duncan had gained places at the high table with the Lord of Lorn at one end and the Earl of Argyll at the other. The two highest ranking men in the hall glared at each other like caged dogs and Gyllis was happy to be sitting away from the stuffy posturing and politicking upon the dais.

Alice pointed toward the door. "Alan MacCoul just arrived with an impressive retinue. Is he a knight?"

"He looks gallant like a knight," said Marion.

Gyllis tore off the butt end of bread and tossed it at the twins. "Sillies. Do you not know anything? He's a *bastard*." She cringed. Alan had stopped her earlier that day and had been a tad too familiar, grasping her hands and telling her how lovely she looked. She'd tried to be polite though there was something sinister in his stare. Gyllis couldn't put her finger on it, but those lignite eyes made her uneasy.

Helen raised the ewer of watered wine. "Looking at his ceremonial armor, I'd say he's a wealthy bastard."

Alice craned her neck to better see him, making a blatant show of ogling. "Aye, he must have ample property."

"Good heavens, Alice, turn around. You're making a fool of yourself." Gyllis eyed her sister across the table. "You'd best set your sights a wee bit higher. Duncan would never approve of an untitled man." She leaned forward to whisper. "No one even knows who his father is."

Alice clapped a hand over her mouth. "That does sound like a scandalous story."

Marion giggled. "At least he's handsome if ill-bred."

A servant placed a trencher of roasted meat and stewed vegetables in front of Gyllis. "Thank heavens the food's here. Your minds have run amuck from hunger."

"Pardon me, is this seat taken?" The deep voice came from behind.

Gyllis cringed. Alan MacCoul had moved out of sight. *Please no*. She feigned an annoyed frown and turned. Her heart hammered in rapid succession. "Oh my." She smiled broadly and scooted aside on the bench, squeezing into Helen. "Of course, we would love to have you join us."

Sir Sean grinned. He could melt an entire slab of butter with his smile—straight, white teeth, bold jaw with a neat and closely cropped beard. His shoulder-length, dark brown hair and azure eyes made him look devilishly dangerous.

The bench was so crowded, his thigh and shoulder pressed against hers. In any other venue, such touching would be indecent, but Gyllis couldn't have moved if she'd wanted to. Her heart fluttered and she leaned into him a bit more.

"Sir Sean, Why are you not wearing your ceremonial armor?" Alice asked.

"Honestly?" Sean shot a puzzled look to Gyllis. "That sort of pomp is only reserved for weddings and court appearances. I'm far more comfortable wearing a plaid and doublet."

"Alan MacCoul has donned his ceremonial armor." Marion pointed. "Even the Lord of Lorn is sporting a silver breastplate."

Sir Sean's shoulder ticked up, but a tempest brewed behind his eyes. "Mayhap I incorrectly assumed this eve to be a more casual affair. I'm afraid my uncle makes Beltane a greater spectacle every year."

"The church is insisting we call it May Day." Gyllis lifted the trencher of meat and smoothed her shoulder against his as she offered it to him. "I think you are admirably dressed."

"My thanks." Sean selected a thick piece of roast lamb with his eating knife.

She replaced the tray. Helen nudged Gyllis with an elbow and she scooted flush against Sean's thigh. Though she wore layers of skirts, his leg felt hard as stone. *Goodness, with flesh as solid as his, he needs no armor*. She dared glance his way. "Apologies. The hall is awfully crowded."

Sean faced her and lowered his lids, fanned with long, dark lashes. Gyllis liked that he had to cast his gaze downward to meet hers. So often she was self-conscious about her height, but Sean MacDougall stood at least a head taller.

"Are you looking forward to Beltane?" he asked.

"Aye," she said. "The games will be great sport."

Helen leaned forward. "I hope the weather remains in our favor."

"Me as well." Sean held up his eating knife. "I prefer running on dry ground."

"I'm looking forward to the Maypole dances," Alice said.

Marion licked her lips. "And pigs on the spit—nothing better than pork roasted over an open fire."

"Mm, I can practically taste it now." Under the table, Sean's fingers brushed Gyllis's thigh. "And you? What are you looking forward to on the morrow?"

"Everything." She inhaled, her heart hammering like a snare drum. Sir Sean smelled of rosemary soap and spice. *How undeniably intoxicating*. Her eyelids fluttered while her head swooned. "Would you care to sit on our plaid…weather permitting of course?"

He reached for his tankard as if considering.

Gyllis could have kicked herself. *Oh heavens, I've been too forward. He most likely has other plans*. She flicked her hair with a toss of her head. "I'm certain Mother and Duncan will enjoy your company. After all, we haven't seen you at Kilchurn Castle in ages." *Now I've done it. Why can I not keep my mouth shut?*

Sean sipped then offered a nod. "I'm not positive Lord Duncan will approve, but I would be remiss if I did not accept your generous invitation."

"You will?" Beneath the table, Gyllis clasped her hands, trying to quell her excitement. "Very well, then. I shall ensure I bring along a plaid of ample size for us all to sit upon."

She hesitated for a moment, wondering what she should say next. Did Sean agree because they had been friends for such a long time? Nine years her senior, she'd known him nearly all her life, looked up to him when she was a wee lass, and as a teenager, admired him. They'd shared many a glance across Kilchurn's great hall, especially since she came into her majority. Gyllis had always interpreted meaning into those glances. However, Sean had never been more than courteous—though he was a good dance partner when he wasn't off on the king's business with Duncan. She stole a sidewise glance at him then quickly looked at her plate.

He's staring at me. Surely that must mean something.

The musicians moved into place on the balcony above—a fiddler, a drummer and a piper.

Alice clapped her hands. "It looks like his lordship has planned country dances for this eve."

Gyllis stole another look at Sean—he was still staring and now grinning at her. "Ah…It looks like a plaid and doublet were the perfect choice for this evening's dancing."

The fiddler started in on a reel and benches scraped across the floorboards. Sean stood and offered his hand. "I believe I owe you a dance, Miss Gyllis."

Her heart thrummed in tandem with the foot-stomping music. "You're ever so kind, sir knight."

"You must dance with us all, Sir Sean," Marion chimed.

Gyllis wanted to tell her sisters to go find their own dancing partners. But that wasn't the way of things at a Highland gathering. Everyone danced with everyone. At the moment, however, Gyllis rested her palm atop Sean's powerful hand. Though they were barely

touching, gooseflesh rose across her skin. She prayed this would be a very long reel indeed.

Sean probably shouldn't have agreed to sit with Gyllis and her family at the morrow's Beltane feast, but her eyes had looked so hopeful, he couldn't say no. Since his father was ill, as future Chieftain of Dunollie, Sean should keep company with his clan. But he wouldn't worry about that now. He led the lovely lass to the dance floor, his thigh still tingling where it had been flush against hers. All he cared to do at the moment was watch her gracefully twirl in the crook of his arm.

In a fortnight he'd return to the borders, sleeping in stables with a mob of smelly warriors. He could allow himself a modicum of enjoyment over the next sennight, even if Duncan Campbell didn't exactly agree. Besides, the coming months would have no such pleasures. Sean was never one to buck a challenge, and he'd had been enamored with Gyllis since…since…honestly since she'd turned from a spoiled gap-toothed lass into a stunning woman.

"Have you had much opportunity to dance as of late?" Gyllis asked.

"None at all. I'm afraid all there was time for was riding, eating, sleeping and fighting the English." Sean's belly squeezed when she smiled, her dimples dipping into the high color of her cheeks.

"Oh my, that does sound tedious." She assumed her place in line, standing across from him. "Do you remember how Mother used to make you partner with us during our dancing lessons?"

"I shall never forget." At the time, he'd considered Gyllis an annoying child. He chuckled—he'd been sixteen and she seven. And as a young squire, Sean hated being forced to partner with the lasses. He had more important things to conquer during his fostering—like proving himself to the Lord of Glenorchy and earning his knighthood. As a matter of fact, he'd rarely had time to think of anything except enforcement work. But he did love it. Duncan called him a ghost because Sean's strengths lay in tracking and ambush.

The fiddler stamped his foot indicating the dance was to begin and Sean locked elbows with Gyllis. Her arms were long, yet lithe. *Willowy*.

She fluttered her lovely eyelashes at him. "I always thought you would rather be elsewhere than dancing with us."

Sean reached over and patted her hand. So small beneath his callused fingers, her skin was softer than silk. "Perhaps as children, but right now there is no place I'd rather be."

The dancers formed three large circles. Sean held Gyllis's hand while another woman danced in the center. He scarcely noticed the

woman to his left. Gyllis's intoxicating scent of fresh cut flowers and honey captivated him. The bodice of her green gown was cinched taut around her waist. Creamy white breasts swelled above the neckline—not too small, and most certainly not too large. Her cleavage provided plenty to captivate his interest.

She glanced up at him and grinned. Afraid he'd been caught staring at her breasts, Sean snapped his gaze to her eyes. By God, they were the most tantalizing color of moss. He looked closer. He'd always thought she had black rims around her irises, but the more he studied them, the more he could swear the rings were navy blue. "Exquisite."

"Pardon?"

"Ah, your ey…."

Gyllis released his hand and skipped into the center of the circle. Sean studied the others with no clue as to where they were in the reel. Well, at least if Gyllis was in the ring, she'd spin with the man directly across then return to twirl with Sean. That was the good part of dancing—if he had a lapse of attention, he could usually pick the steps back up.

As he expected, Gyllis skipped toward him, her inordinately long chestnut tresses swishing behind her. He locked hands with her and spun. "Did I tell you how bonny you look this eve?"

She giggled and slid back into place. Irritated to turn away and join elbows with the woman behind, Sean continued with the reel. They wound their way around the circle until again he held Gyllis's hand in his. "You've become quite an accomplished dancer."

"Thank you." She blessed him with her dimples again. "I daresay you could use a lesson or two from me."

He chuckled. Someone had noticed his inattentiveness. "It would be my pleasure to take advantage of your offer someday soon."

Her mouth twisted. "But you must return to the borders."

"Aye, for a time." The music stopped. "But I shan't be away indefinitely."

"Miss Gyllis." Alan MacCoul stepped beside her. "Would you dance with me?"

Sean's gut churned. If only he could challenge the bastard on the spot. But a friendly gathering was no place to make a scene. His jaw twitched. *One dance*.

She cast Sean a questioning look. He tightened his grip on her hand and leaned to her ear. "Meet me in the courtyard after this tune."

Her gasp was barely audible, but she met his gaze with more than trust filling her eyes. The excitement written on her face made him yearn for more than a kiss, though that was all he could hope for.

Sean released his hold and bowed. "M'lady." Then he spun on his

heel.

Why does that bastard plague me every time I turn around? And what the hell is he doing dressed like he's going to a king's coronation?

As he headed outside, he ground his fist into his palm. He had no business arranging a secret meeting with a woman, especially his best friend's sister. *It must have been her eyes that caused my lack in judgment. I shall keep the conversation light and see her back to the hall before anyone realizes Gyllis has slipped away*.

Chapter Three

Gyllis could hardly wait until the dance with Alan was over. She glanced at the great hall doors every time she had a clear view of them. Had Sean honestly whispered in her ear and asked to meet her in the courtyard? At long last her dreams were finally coming true.

Her palms perspired as she skipped along in a serpentine pattern, grasping the other dancers' hands. When she completed the circle and again clasped hands with Alan, she shuddered. With his black hair combed away from his face, he was handsome, but the way his dark eyes regarded her made Gyllis uneasy. She could never trust someone with such an intense stare. He seemed almost crazed, and starved. Alan couldn't possibly be hungry, they'd only just dined.

She spun outward. From the dais Duncan watched her, sitting on the edge of his chair as if he could spring across the hall any minute. Why her brother was so overwhelmingly protective was beyond her. *Heaven's stars, he's more watchful than a father.* She harrumphed. *At least they want their daughters to marry and make alliances with other clans.*

When the music ended, Gyllis's stomach swarmed with an attack of butterflies.

"Would you care for another dance?" Alan asked.

Her gaze darted to the doors. If she told him she planned to take a turn in the courtyard, he'd surely follow her. "Thank you, but I would be remiss if I didn't suggest you dance with one of my sisters."

He grasped her hand. His touch was rough like Sean's, but firmer and nowhere near as inviting. "But I'd prefer to dance with you."

Gyllis pulled her hand away and rubbed it. "Perhaps another time." She curtsied and made the pretense of moving toward the wall while watching Duncan out of the corner of her eye. Fortunately, he'd turned his attention to a conversation with the chieftain beside him. When certain Alan wasn't following her, she skirted toward the door. With one last glance over her shoulder to ensure no one was watching, she slipped outside.

She stood for a moment, blinking her eyes to help them adjust to the darkness.

A hand grasped her elbow. "Walk with me."

Her heart stuttered. "Sir Sean, you are full of surprises."

He slid his hand down her forearm and threaded his fingers through hers. "Apologies. I hope you do not think me untoward."

"Not at all. We've know each other since I can remember." She leaned a bit closer to him. "Duncan trusts you—I trust you."

“Aye? Mayhap too much.” He looked at her, the whites of his eyes glowing in the moonlight. “I shouldn’t have asked you to step out with me.”

“But I wanted to.”

He drew her hand over his heart. “I cannot chance sullying your reputation.”

Of course Gyllis knew what he meant, though she still looked over both shoulders. “That is why I was careful to ensure no one was watching when I slipped out of the hall.”

He led her into the shadows at the far side of the well then turned and faced her, clasping both her hands between his much larger palms. “When I said you look bonny this eve, I really wanted to say you are more radiant than any woman in the hall.” His voice grew deeper, the rumble of it making gooseflesh run in tingling waves over her skin.

They were standing so close she could have sworn Sean could hear her heart pattering. She emitted a nervous laugh. “You exaggerate, but I thank you.” Her insides were about to bubble out of control like a tankard too full of ale. “I cannot say how happy I am you were able to come to the games. I prayed you would be here.”

“You did?” He sounded surprised. “I would have thought a lass with such a well-respected family would have far greater things on her mind than me.”

“You are the heir to a chieftainship. I think that would qualify as a suitable subject to occupy any noble lassie’s thoughts. Unless…”

“Unless?”

She had to ask. “Are you promised?”

A deep chuckle rumbled from his chest. “Nay. I’ve been too busy keeping peace in the name of King James to become mixed up in a betrothal.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders tensed. *What did he mean by mixed up?* She started to step away, but he tugged her closer. So near, his warm breath caressed her forehead.

“Forgive me,” he purred. “I shouldn’t have jested.”

She bit her bottom lip. “I’m afraid I’m being overly serious. After all, we’ve been friends all our lives. Why should you not jest?”

He brushed an errant lock of hair under her circlet. “Gyllis?”

“Aye?”

“Have you ever been kissed?”

“I—” Before she could utter her next word, Sean’s lips brushed hers in the most feathery kiss she’d ever imagined. Her head spun. With a sigh, she swooned into him. “I’ve nay been kissed like that before.”

“That was no kiss.” He wrapped his arms around her as if creating a protective barrier where nothing in the world could harm her. His

face looked incredibly bold in the moon glow—desire filled his eyes, yet the dark shadow of his beard and long, wavy hair gave him a look of danger.

Hot blood thrummed beneath her skin as he studied her lips. His breath smelled of mint laced with a hint of aged whisky. Her tongue slipped out and wet her bottom lip.

Please, kiss me again.

With a tilt of his head, Sean plied her with his sultry mouth. Gyllis's knees wobbled, making her body crush into his hard chest. Her breasts molded into him, filling with desire. She closed her eyes and melted. If there was a heaven, she'd found it in his arms.

He spread his lips slightly and probed with his tongue. Gyllis's eyes flashed open and she tried to tug her head away, but Sean's hand slid up and cradled her crown. Relaxing, she parted her mouth. It felt too good not to play along. Then he stroked her tongue. Shivers coursed through her body.

This kissing is earth shattering.

Again closing her eyes, she followed Sean's lead while he swirled his tongue with hers, as if their mouths were dancing. Then he trailed feathery kisses along her neck.

"Now that was a kiss, lass." His deep voice rumbled with intoxicating resonance.

Floating. I must be floating. "I cannot tell you how long I've wanted you to do that."

"Aye? I reckon I've thought about it for quite some time myself."

"Honestly?" Gyllis still could not believe she stood there in Sean's arms. "Why did you wait so long?"

He chuckled. "Your brother isn't overly fond of the idea, considering he and I are both the king's enforcers."

"If it were up to my brother, I'd live in spinsterhood the rest of my days."

"I doubt that, but 'tis hard for him to see his younger sister in the arms of a man."

She skimmed her finger along his bearded chin. "Would you feel that way—if you had a sister, that is?"

"Aye, I suppose I would." His breath skimmed hot on her face as he drew nearer and kissed her cheek. "I cannot bear to think of another man kissing you."

She grew bold, rose on her toes and kissed his lips. "I like kissing you."

"Mm." Sean slid his fingers along her neck and splayed them through her tresses as his mouth again plied hers with the most rapturous kiss imaginable.

Swooning in his arms, Gyllis wanted this moment to last forever. If

only she and Sean were completely alone and not at a fete with people mulling about, she'd keep her arms wrapped around him and kiss him until the sun came up.

"Unhand her, MacDougall," demanded a gruff voice. "Taking advantage of the Lord of Glenorchy's sister? I always kent you were a cur."

Sean tugged Gyllis behind him and faced Alan MacCoul. "You're prying where you have no business."

"Am I now?" Alan sauntered toward them. "You were holding the lady in your arms and I've heard not a word of your betrothal."

Gyllis started to step forward. "Mr. MacCoul—"

Sean stopped her advance with a straight arm, glaring at Alan. "Why are you always poking your nose in my affairs?" In an instant, Sean's voice had gone from soothing to a deadly growl.

Alan fingered his dirk, his eyes narrowing. "I've never been able to tolerate a spoilt chieftain's son."

His dirk hissed from its scabbard. In one motion Alan lunged.

Gyllis screamed.

Sean sprang to the side and grabbed Alan's arm, twisting him away from Gyllis. The dirk dropped. As she skittered against the wall, Sean flipped the blackguard onto his back. Before she could blink, the MacDougall warrior had him pinned to the ground with his fingers clamped around his neck. "Why my father tolerates your shite, I'll never know."

Alan choked and kicked his feet to no avail. "You-you've no clue who I am, do you?" he croaked.

"What are you talking about?" Sean leaned in. "I ought to—"

Duncan barreled into the courtyard, brandishing his enormous sword. "Gyllis! What are you doing out here?"

She clutched her fists under her chin and shot a panicked glance to Sean. "I…I…I…"

"Get your bonny arse inside and find your mother. Bless it, must I weld a ball and chain around your ankle?"

"But…" She scooted past Sean and Alan, her hands trembling. "He protected me."

Sean kept his eyes on Alan, but inclined his head toward her. "I shall see you anon, Miss Gyllis."

"Until the morrow, Sir Sean." She hastened to the door, but before entering, turned to watch.

Duncan pointed his sword at Alan's temple. "Be on your way MacCoul. This is a time of truce, no matter your quarrel with MacDougall. All can be settled with a bit of healthy competition."

Sean released his grasp and stood, palming a dagger. "I shall relish such an opportunity."

Alan scrambled to his feet, retrieved his dirk and shook it at them both. “This will *never* be over. I will imprison you in irons and laugh while your body rots in a dank and musty cave.” The hatred in the man’s voice was palpable.

Why on earth is he so bitter? Chewing her lip, Gyllis darted inside and skirted around the noisy hall before Duncan could chastise her yet again.

Clasping her hand taut to her chest, she raced toward Helen.

“Gyllis, Ma has had us searching all over for you. Where have you been?”

She grabbed Helen’s hands and tugged her toward the stairwell. “Hurry. I’m bursting at the seams to tell you.”

“What is it? You look like you could dance on the rafter beams.”

Gyllis waggled her eyebrows. “I probably could if someone gave me a lift.” She raced up the winding steps and into the tiny chamber where all four sisters were appointed to sleep. She closed the door and caught her breath. “You’ll never believe it.”

“What?”

“I know not what was more romantic,” Gyllis bubbled. “The kiss or that he fought for my virtue.”

“A kiss?”

Gyllis grasped Helen’s hands and spun her in a circle. “Aye. At last Sir Sean kissed me.”

Helen giggled. “Honestly? How scandalous—and here at Beltane with so many people about?”

Spinning off across the room, Gyllis hugged herself. “Aye.” She stopped and swayed in place. “It was glorious, Helen. I felt like I was floating away on a wispy cloud.”

Her sister drew her hand to her lips. “And you said he fought for your virtue?”

“After he kissed me, Alan MacCoul came out and drew his dirk—said all sorts of vile things.”

“Oh no,” Helen gasped with her eyes wide. “That dreadful man.”

“Aye, but in the blink of an eye, Sean disarmed him and wrestled him to the ground. Why I’ve never seen a man move so fast.”

“Did he hurt him?”

“I do not think so.” Gyllis rolled her eyes. “Then Duncan came charging out of the hall like a mad hornet and sent Alan on his way.” Her shoulders dropped. “And then he ordered me inside, the brute—spoilt all my fun.”

Helen pulled her onto the pallet and sat facing her. “Goodness, it sounds as if you had enough excitement to last the duration of the games.”

Emitting a long sigh, Gyllis grinned. “The best part?”

“Aye?”
“’Tis only the first day.”

Chapter Four

The next morning, Sean found a place behind the stables to stretch his aching limbs. Though he was accustomed to sleeping on hard ground, the floorboards in the great hall provided no comfort. At a gathering like this, rank mattered not. A single man spread his plaid in any available space, unless he was an earl.

"There you are." Gyllis strode toward him, smiling like sunshine. She held out a white kerchief. "Will you take this for luck?"

He accepted the token and turned it over in his hands. Embroidered with bluebells, he couldn't help but hold it to his nose. *It smells like a mountain of heather*. "My thanks." He offered a sheepish smile. Duncan had given him a good earful last eve, and he'd been right. Sean never should have asked Gyllis to meet him in the courtyard—especially after dark, without an escort, and with so many clansmen about. Any number of people could have assumed the worst and tried to ruin her reputation. Bloody hell, Sean could have been forced to marry the lass on the spot.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

He blinked, thinking for a moment that marrying her would have been rather fun. "Nay." *Blistering barnacles*. Sean didn't have time for a wife even if he could convince Duncan he was worthy to marry his sister.

"Then why are you looking at me as if I've got the ague?" Gyllis was too perceptive. But that's another thing he liked about her. Not only beautiful, she was sharp as a hawk and quick with her tongue.

He resisted his urge to grasp her hand and pull her into his arms. Instead, he nervously wrapped her kerchief around his pointer finger. "I've a fair bit on my mind."

She looked at the cloth and then her gaze trailed sidewise. "Would you…um….prefer not to carry my kerchief?"

Damn his hesitation—he'd offended her. He took a step in and cupped her cheek. "I am honored to carry it."

She turned up her face and pursed her lips, eyelids fluttering closed.

Sean couldn't help but take note of all the people mulling about. *Bless it, I cannot kiss her here*. The resulting scandal would be unmitigated. It would ruin her for certain and send Duncan and the Campbells after him like a pack of wild dogs. Sean clasped her slender fingers and drew them to his lips, giving her a quick peck. Forget the heather. The scent of her skin smelled fresher than a pool of fragrant water lilies. He closed his eyes and inhaled again, until she slid her

fingers from his grasp.

With a look of bewilderment she cradled her hand and stared at it, as if she were no longer willing to look at his face. “I’m told the piping and drumming competition will be during the feast this eve.”

“Aye? That should liven things up.”

“Gyllis.” Helen came from around the stable’s corner. “Mother is looking for you. We must take our places for the race.”

She grinned at Sean—though her smile had a twist, as he might have confused her with his reluctance to kiss her lips. “You’d best go, else you’ll miss the start.”

He held up the kerchief. “I’d better. And thank you—this will bring me luck, I am certain.”

Sean watched her disappear around the stable wall while clenching his jaw. He either needed to have a somber discussion with her brother, or rein himself in. And given his present state of affairs, he should do the latter. MacDougalls didn’t marry Campbells, not since the time of Robert the Bruce when the MacDougalls had lost over half of their holdings—some of which were unfairly dispatched to the Campbell Clan. Many a man loyal to his father still harbored deep resentment for the Campbells.

The ram’s horn sounded, announcing the race would soon begin. Sean shook his head and headed off. He hadn’t come to the games to make merry with Gyllis. He’d come to earn the respect of his countrymen—to win these games and ensure MacDougall continued to be a feared name throughout the Highlands.

Nearly fifty contestants formed a queue at the edge of Loch Etive whilst Lorn’s clerk launched into a proclamation of the rules. “There will be no backstabbing and no weapons of any kind…”

Sean chuckled to himself. A Highland race wasn’t without its share of backstabbers. It didn’t surprise him to see Alan MacCoul halfway down the line leering at him like a venomed snake.

Duncan trotted up beside Sean. “I nearly missed it.”

Sean arched an eyebrow. “Is anything amiss? ’Tis not like you to be late to a contest of any sort.”

“A missive came from the king.”

“Aye? What did it say?”

Duncan patted his doublet. “Dunno—haven’t opened it yet. If I had, I would have missed the start. Besides, a missive can wait a bit even if it is from his grace.”

“Remind me to tell the king you said that the next time we’re at court.”

Duncan smirked. “Should such a foul rumor come my way, I would deny it emphatically.”

The clerk finished his oration and the ram’s horn sounded.

Sprinting, Sean sped ahead to ensure he positioned himself at the front of the pack. And in an eight-mile race, he'd keep pace behind the leader until the very end.

Duncan had the same idea and bloody MacCoul wasn't far behind. Sean wouldn't concern himself with that blackguard. He'd drop off soon enough.

Everything proceeded in respectable civility until Sean and the leaders rounded a farmhouse at the halfway point. Two brigands wearing chausses and shirts sprang from nowhere, barreling straight toward Sean. Startled by the movement of the first attacker, Sean's instincts took over. Ducking, he flung the bastard over his back. When the second one hit, he wasn't so lucky. Walloped in the side of the head, he stagger-stepped sideways until he crashed to the ground.

It was bad enough to have the contestants fighting each other, but now hoodlums had been planted? Someone must have a very large wager indeed.

Sean scrambled to his feet, fists at the ready. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Duncan throw a boot into number one's gut. Sean eyed the second man and aimed a blow at the hinge of his jaw. Hitting his mark, teeth cracked. The bastard's hands flew to his face before he collided with the dirt.

Duncan beckoned him. "Hurry."

Sean ran beside his friend. "Who were those swine?"

"No idea." Duncan took in a deep inhale. "But I'm certain they were waiting for you. They darted straight for you without a mind to the others."

Sean sped his pace. "We can still win if we push."

Duncan waved him on. "This is your sport. Go."

Sean sprinted for the leaders, more intent than ever to win. Someone had set a trap for him—knew he was the man to beat.

Most of the spectators lined the outer bailey wall-walk on the Loch Etive side of the castle, all straining for a glimpse of the leaders in the footrace. Gyllis stood beside Helen, barely able to contain her excitement.

Yes, Sean had appeared a tad despondent when she'd given him her kerchief, but after all, he was preparing for a race. If they hadn't been interrupted last eve, she would have given it to him then. But she didn't want to think about that now. The weather was fine and Sean would sit with her during the feast just as they'd planned. She needn't consider a thing beyond that at the moment.

"There they are," someone yelled.

Gyllis cast her gaze toward the wood. Four runners barreled out of the trees, racing for the castle. The second man shoved the leader,

who swung back his elbow. The closer they came to the finish line, the more the runners pushed with fists swinging.

"How can they stay ahead of the pack when they're fighting like that?" Helen asked.

"The fighting has most likely just begun," said a man behind them.

A fifth man darted from the forest. Gyllis made out Sean's long stride, close behind the fighting leaders.

Alice shook her finger. "Look! Alan MacCoul is winning."

Unable to believe it, Gyllis leaned further over the crenel notch. Sure enough, Alan had shoved his way into the lead. "But Sir Sean's speeding around them."

Shouts from the crowd grew louder.

Gyllis hopped in place and clapped her hands. "Faster, Sir Sean!"

Alice shook her fists in the air. "Run like the wind, Mr. MacCoul."

Gyllis gave her sister a firm whack on the shoulder. "Excuse me. How can you cheer for that blackguard after he threatened Sir Sean with his dirk last eve?"

Alice stopped hopping up and down. "He did?"

"Aye." With a well-founded nod, Gyllis returned her attention to the race. Sean indeed was moving closer to the lead, now one or two paces behind Alan. Her gaze darted to the finish line. *I don't think he can make it. Heavens, if Alan wins, it will upset everything*.

Sean closed the gap. Alan struck out with his right. Sean clutched his arm and stumbled over the finish line right behind that blasted MacCoul. Within the blink of an eye, the Lord of Lorn's officials surrounded Sean.

"He's been cut!" someone yelled from below.

Gasping, Gyllis started for the stairwell.

"You shall remain up here, young lady." Mother grasped her shoulder.

"But Sir Sean's been hurt."

Mother rolled her eyes with a tsk of her tongue. "I assure you, simply sparring with your brother has caused Sir Sean injuries much worse than a wee cut on the arm."

Gyllis huffed and resumed her place in front of the crenel notch. She couldn't see *anything*. Sean was surrounded by any number of men and Alan was nowhere to be seen.

"It appears you were right about Mr. MacCoul," Alice said. "He definitely acts like he's a bastard."

"Pardon me?" Mother stepped between them. "Mind your vulgar tongue."

Gyllis inched away until she was out of Ma's grasp. Not knowing how badly Sean was injured twisted her stomach in knots. She could stand there no longer. "I'm heading out to see what I can do to help."

“Gyllis,” Mother called.

She didn’t stop. If nothing else, she had to ensure Sean was all right. She dashed down the narrow spiral steps, pushing past people dawdling about, and ran out through the gate. Stopping in her tracks, Gyllis suddenly couldn’t breathe. The crowd had thinned and Sean stood with a woman wrapped in his embrace. The woman’s face was blocked by her wimple, but there was no mistaking it, Sean had his arms around the lass for a good long time.

Dumbfounded, Gyllis stood and stared. Her hands shook. She wanted to scream, but could form no words through the tightening of her throat.

A man walked past and brushed her shoulder. “I beg your pardon.”

Gyllis blinked, but was still too stunned to acknowledge the man. She backed into the tunnel of the barbican and drew her hand to her chest. *I’m a fool, a stupid romantic who will never find a husband because my family locks me away in a castle and hardly ever allows me to visit court. Beltane was my chance—and now if that mutton-head dares to come sit on my plaid this eve, I’ll tell him exactly what I think of him. Mayhap he’s double-crossed Mr. MacCoul—mayhap that’s why Alan lashes out at Sean at every opportunity*.

Da? Dead? Sean had gone completely numb. He couldn’t feel the wee cut to his arm, nor did he care. When Angus and Jinny approached with the news, he’d fallen into Jinny’s outstretched arms, hardly able to inhale.

“It has only been two days. He told me he was fine.” Sean coughed to choke back the tears welling in his eyes.

“Aye,” said Jinny, the MacDougall Clan’s healer. “We all thought it was a passing cold, but last eve he took a turn. ’Twas the sweating sickness for certain.”

Sean glared at Angus, his father’s man-at-arms. “Why did no one fetch me last eve?”

“He didn’t complain at all. We had no idea how bad it was until this morn when Sarah took him his porridge.” Angus looked him in the eye. “By then he was gone. ’Tis now up to you to lead the clan, m’laird.”

Sean stood dumbfounded. For the love of God, he was now the Chieftain of Dunollie? Yes, he’d always known he’d succeed his father, but not like this, not now.

Angus inclined his head toward the horses. “We must away.”

Jinny grasped Sean’s arm and shoved up his blood-soaked sleeve. “I’ll need to wrap this first. Angus, I’ve a rolled bandage in the satchel. Fetch it for me.”

Sean tugged his arm away. “Nay. It can wait.”

“”Tis too deep to ignore.” She took the bandage from Angus. “You’re as pig-headed as your father. It won’t take but a moment, unless you want to grow weak in the head by the time you reach Dunollie.”

With a groan, Sean held out his arm and nodded to Angus. “Who else knows about this?”

“We kept it quiet—didn’t want word to slip out without informing you first.”

“Good. I shall pen a formal proclamation after we reach Dunollie.”

Jinny tied off the bandage. “’Tis only fitting it should come from you.”

Sean pushed down his sleeve and strode toward his horse. At least Angus had been smart enough to gather his things and have his horse saddled and ready to ride as soon as he crossed the finish line.

“Where are you off to?” The Lord of Lorn rushed up to him, his black mantle billowing with the wind. “The swimming competition is anon—and MacCoul was disqualified for using a blade. You’re our victor. You cannot—”

Sean gripped his uncle’s shoulder and placed his lips to his ear. “Da’s dead. Keep it to yourself until I have the keep in order. I must muster my men. Word like this gets out when our enemies ken I’ve been away, God knows what they’ll do.” Dread snaked up Sean’s neck. Aye, he needed to grieve his father’s death, but it was more important for him to take care of the clan. Once he had control, he’d issue an appropriate decree to be read by the criers.

“I shall make your excuses.” Lorn pursed his lips. “Do what you must. I’ll keep your confidence. But do not wait too long, else a scandal could erupt with your reputation sullied. People will think you’ve something to hide.”

“It shan’t be but a day, two at most.” Sean mounted his horse. “Besides, this news would serve to put a damper on your festivities. You wouldn’t want that.” He dug in his heels and cantered south to Dunollie. Thank God he was only four miles away. If he’d still been on the borders it would have taken him a week to travel home—and even longer for Angus to find him.

Chapter Five

Gyllis sat in her saddle with her back hunched and stared at her gelding's withers. She'd been furious when Sean didn't bother to present himself at all during last night's Beltane festival. She couldn't decide what hurt worse, seeing him in the arms of another woman, or having been completely disregarded as if her invitation meant nothing. Her heart ached—felt like Sean had taken his dagger and cut it out.

Duncan had been right. Sean MacDougall was not good enough for her or any of the Campbell sisters. He was a womanizer of the worst sort.

Worse, Gyllis had not accomplished a one of her goals on their trip to Dunstaffnage and now she and her sisters were headed back to Kilchurn Castle to be tucked away until Lord knew when. Her entire body hurt. Her throat was sore—probably from crying herself to sleep—her eyelids were heavy and her head hurt so much, she could have sworn someone clamped it between a pair of smithy's tongs.

At least she'd be protected from the cruel world cloistered within Kilchurn Castle's curtain walls. If she never saw Sean MacDougall again, it would be too soon. She stuck out her tongue and spat. *And to consider I kissed his filthy mouth. I wish I could curl up in my chamber and never come out.*

Her sisters were riding just behind Mother with Gyllis taking up the rear. Of course, they were accompanied by a heavily-armed guard of sixteen men in four-point diamond formation. When they traveled, Duncan always ensured they had a well-armed retinue to protect them against outlaws.

Gyllis looked over her shoulder and realized her brother wasn't with them. "Where *is* Duncan?"

Mother turned in her saddle. "He received a dire missive from the king. He left for court at first light. Enforcers business."

What is it about the Highland Enforcers? They are always here and gone. Sean's most likely traveled with him—not that I care about his whereabouts in the slightest.

"Lady Meg will not like it when she discovers he's off to court again," Helen said.

Alice tapped her mare's rump with her riding crop. "Heaven's stars, Duncan's wife awaits him with two wee bairns and he's off on yet another *inordinately* important errand."

"It is not our place to question your brother. He's the Lord of Glenorchy," Mother said. Gyllis could swear Ma would defend Duncan

with her last breath.

Helen smoothed a hand over her veil. “Aye, but not everyone is made of iron, Ma. I have no idea how you lasted for seven years while Da was fighting in the Crusades.”

“That which you cannot change must be endured. I coped quite nicely—and the Glenorchy coffers grew healthier as a result. If you are faced with adversity, you must meet it head-on and make the best of your lot.” Mother twisted round and shook her finger at the lasses. “Eventually you will gain reward from your efforts.”

Slumping further in her saddle, Gyllis presently cared not to think of being strong and industrious. She was not the lady of a keep, nor did she have any prospects of becoming one…unless Duncan was at court arranging a betrothal with some unsuspecting noble. *Aye? That will never happen*.

Swooning with a wave of nausea, she moved her hand over her mouth. Her throat burned with an awful taste oozing over her tongue. Quickly, she leaned away from her gelding and retched with a gagging croak.

If it hadn’t been for her knee hooked in the top pommel of her sidesaddle, she would have fallen on her face, curled into a ball and waited for death to claim her right there on the trail.

“Halt!” Mother shouted. A circle of horses surrounded Gyllis. “Are you ill, child?”

“I think I am.” Gyllis’s mouth filled with saliva while her head pounded even more relentlessly than before. “Initially I thought I was upset, but I’m perspiring and shaking. Everything aches.”

Mother pointed eastward. “Mevan, you must speed our pace.”

“Very well, m’lady.” The man-at-arms circled his hand over his head. “You heard her ladyship. Onward.”

Gyllis had no choice but to persevere, growing sicker by the moment. By the time they reached Kilchurn Castle, she could no longer sit. She slumped over her horse’s neck, eyes closed, holding on and hoping the gelding would remain on course with the others. Her entire body felt as if pins had been jabbed into her flesh. Every step the horse made jostled her bones like she would shatter at any moment.

Maintaining a fast trot, Mevan led them into the inner courtyard. Unassisted, Mother hopped from her mount and addressed her man-at-arms. “We must see her above stairs straight away.” She then pointed to Marion and Alice. “Quickly, fetch Lady Meg. Tell her Gyllis’s illness came on suddenly. She’ll know what to do.”

Mevan stepped beside the gelding and reached up. “Fall into my arms, Miss Gyllis, I’ll see you’re right comfortable in no time.”

It took all her strength to slip her knee from the top pommel and

ease off the saddle.

Mevan's grip clamped too tight, like knives gouging her flesh. "You're afire, lass."

The rumble of his voice caused her head to throb with unbearable pain. Gyllis shook uncontrollably. Her teeth chattered. "I'm so c-cold."

"I've no doubt you're fevered," he said, whisking her into the keep and straight up the tower stairs.

Gyllis clutched her arms close to her body, praying the jostling would soon stop so she could collapse in the folds of her bed. The whole castle was drafty—made her teeth chatter. With no fire lit in her chamber, it was as frigid as it had been outside. She crawled under the bedclothes and shivered while her head pounded mercilessly.

Angels wept from the dreary skies while Sean stood at the graveside beside Kilbride Church on Dunollie lands. The priest droned in an endless monotone, chanting the Latin burial mass. The Tenth Chieftain of Dunollie's death mask had been hastily made. Sean had arranged for the most skilled stonemason to carve the effigy that would complete the tomb, but presently his father's body lay wrapped in linen, hands still holding his bejeweled sword, awaiting internment into the granite crypt that would house his body through eternity.

Sean's mother had died of consumption five years past. Her death had been a somber time in his life, but did not compare to the hollow void now filling his heart.

Da had been a powerful and decisive man. His father led the clan, facing the brutal realities of life, yet he had a gentle streak—one Sean didn't always understand. But from his first memories, he'd looked up to his father—aspired to be like him. A tickle of doubt needled at the back of his neck. How in God's name would he fill his father's shoes?

The clanswomen lamented and sniffled around him. Yet he couldn't weep. The Eleventh Chieftain of Dunollie could not demonstrate weakness. Sean's jaw clenched as he endured the morose tones from the seemingly endless mass.

When at last the priest was silent, he nodded to Evanna, Jinny and Angus's daughter. The lass stepped forward, wiped her eyes, inhaled deeply and began to sing a ghostly tune.

Watchin' yon hills of the heather,
On the shores of the deep blue sea,
A bonnie young lassie sat singin' her sone,
Wi' dew on her plaid an' a tear in her e'e.
She swayed wi' a galley a'sail and aw'ee,
An' aye as it lessen'd she sigh'd an' she sung,
Fareweel to the lad I'll ne'er again see

I'll nay forget ye. Alas, yer mem'ry 'll alway' be wi' me…

Evanna's voice sang clear as a curlew soaring above a loch on a misty dawn. The purity of her tone made chills spread across Sean's back. She repeated the sad verse twice while wails from the women rose.

When the song ended, an eerie pall cast a heavy blanket atop the gathering of MacDougall clansmen and women. The only sounds were sniffles and rainwater dripping from the leaves. Sean had not the inclination to move. He stared at his father's body. Everyone did. He'd always known this time would come, but had been so busy adventuring throughout Scotland, he had never considered it would come so soon. But it wasn't unusual for any man to meet the Lord at eight and fifty.

If only I had spent more time with him. Now I'll nay have a chance.

Angus stepped forward and bowed. He then retrieved the sword from Da's body and strode directly to Sean. "In the name of King James, you are the rightful heir. Carry the chieftain's sword with pride." The henchman held the two-handed sword out. "*Buaidh no bàs*."

"*Buaidh no bàs*!" the clan chorused with the Gaelic MacDougall motto, victory or death.

Clenching his teeth, Sean grasped the sword and drew it from its scabbard. "I will carry this with pride and the MacDougall Clan will grow and prosper." He held the blade over his head. "*Buaidh no bàs*!"

He slid the sword back into its sheath, secured it in his belt and set out. Thunder cracked overhead as he led the clan down the path to Dunollie Castle.

Behind him, hurried footsteps slapped the mud.

The hackles on Sean's neck prickled.

Before he could turn, Da's sword was yanked from his belt. "I should be Chieftain of Dunollie, not a miserable piss-swilling maggot!"

Drawing his dirk, Sean whipped around and crouched. Alan MacCoul moved fast as a fox. With teeth bared, he hacked down in a deadly challenge. Sean jumped back as the blade hissed through the air, just missing his flank. Circling, Sean eyed his nemesis. At last the bastard had given him the opportunity to end their feud once and for all.

Eyeing his target, he waited for Alan to strike—to give him a flicker of an opportunity, and Sean would attack. "Make your move," he growled.

A thud sounded like a stick of wood hitting a tree. Alan's arms dropped with the sword, his face stunned. He plummeted to his knees then fell to his face.

Angus stood behind him, holding a branch as big around as a

man's calf.

Sean picked up his father's sword. "Why did you not let me finish it?"

Alan writhed and groaned.

Angus grasped the cur under the arm and tugged him to his feet. "I've no stomach for another funeral this day."

Sean sauntered forward and slid the blade under MacCoul's chin. "In honor of my father I'll spare you. Take your galley and be gone. I'll have no more of your backstabbing. You are banned from Dunollie lands forever."

Spitting, Alan struggled in Angus's grasp. "He was nay merely your father."

"Aye, we're all hurting." Angus pulled him toward the embankment where the clan's galleys were moored.

"Angus," Sean hollered. "I'll need to see you in my solar forthwith."

Sean sat and stared at his goblet of whisky. His jaw twitched and his gut churned. This was a black day. He may as well make it blacker.

A rap resounded on the door.

Sean raised his goblet and sipped. He'd swirled the fiery liquid around his mouth before swallowing. He knew who'd knocked and it served the varlet right to wait. After one more sip, he placed the goblet on the table. "Come."

Angus stepped inside with his bonnet in hand. "MacCoul has sailed with his galley, m'laird."

After staring at him without blinking, Sean grasped his armrests and squeezed. "I'd have finished him if you hadn't stepped in."

"Aye."

"You ken more than anyone, MacCoul has been a thorn in my side since the day I was born."

"Aye."

"Have you nothing else to say for yourself?" Sean leaned forward. "My father protected that bastard. Do you now see yourself taking up MacCoul's mantle?"

Angus let out a labored sigh and glanced sideways, high color flushing his face. "Nay."

"Then why did you stop me?" Sean slammed his fist on the table.

The older man jolted at the sudden noise then spread his palms. "I-I just reacted. Mayhap 'twas your father's voice in my head."

"It'll nay happen again." Sean shoved back and stood with his palms flat on the table. "Do you ken how your actions made me look in front of the clan?"

“Aye, but you were distraught.”

“Damn it, man, I was defending myself from attack.” Sean paced then kicked a chair. “I respect you as my father’s henchman, but you will never make me look the fool again.”

“Apologies.” Angus bobbed his head. “Agreed. I acted without thought. You’ve every right to be upset with me.”

Sean shook his finger. “I do and I am.” He flicked his wrist. “Go fetch the factor. I want an accounting of the coffers—everything from crofters rents, to notes outstanding, to the size of our herds.”

“Aye, m’laird.”

Sean held up his hand. “A moment.”

Angus raised his brows expectantly.

“Have we any eminent threats?” He didn’t know of any, but he’d been away so much the question needed asking.

“Aside from the errant cattle thief and outlaws in the wood west of Black Lochs, things have been at relative peace for the past five years.”

“What have you done to rid the forest of the outlaws?”

Angus’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “Whenever we run them off, ’tis a matter of time afore they’re replaced by another unsavory lot.”

Sean nodded. “I aim for Dunollie to remain at peace and free from attack. After I’ve met with the factor, I want a detailed account of skirmishes as far back as you can remember.”

Angus bowed. “Very well, m’laird. I’ll return with Master Murdach momentarily.”

Chapter Six

Alan MacCoul didn't sail far—it wasn't even a league to the miserable Isle of Kerrera his father had granted him in hopes he'd till the soil or raise sheep and live a quiet life away from the scrutiny of society. But Alan had no yen for the life of a farmer. He was a warrior, a leader of men.

Even his father would be proud to see the army he'd amassed. The nobleman had been embarrassed by Alan his entire life—did everything to hide his bastard from the world, but that only served to make Alan more determined to prove his worth. He'd spent a few years on the borders, helping the reivers steal sheep and cattle from the English—and each other in lean times. Alan had grown strong and his sword was valued there—as was his coin. All he need do was send word and he'd have five score of Lowlander fighting men, not to mention another score of deposed MacDougalls in addition to Campbells who couldn't stomach the Earl of Argyll's tyranny.

He kept things quiet on Kerrera, however—at least until all was in place to declare his superiority. If he moved too soon, he might lose his income stream, and that most certainly wouldn't do.

He seethed. He'd been standing alone at the stern of his galley, jaw set. Being exiled by Sean MacDougall was almost more than he could bear. *I will make that sniveling magpie pay and I'll laugh as I watch him suffer.*

Alan's mother had made sure he had a place in the MacDougall Clan. After all, it was her clan too, though she had passed years ago.

His most trusted men, Brus and Trevor, came up on either side of him as the galley neared the shore. Brus placed a foot on the bench. "You're nay planning to roll over and take your exile like a dog are you?"

Alan lashed out with a fisted backhand. "Watch your bloody mouth."

Brus stumbled into the hull and wiped his jaw.

Alan leered at him and then Trevor. "How many times do I have to tell you we must wait—seize the opportunity when the time is right?"

"Aye, but with recent events, I'll wager it'll be soon."

Alan grinned. "I've some games planned for the new Chieftain of Dunollie to keep him occupied whilst we prepare."

Trevor nodded. "I like the sound of that."

"First we'll need to ensure our galley is hidden from the mainland. No need for passersby to spot my boat—especially MacDougall men."

"Easily done," Trevor said.

"Good, call the men together. We shall set things in motion this

eve." When the galley eased to a stop upon the smooth rocks, Alan looked toward the shore. "Have you found a smithy? We need to keep building our cache of weapons."

Brus pointed toward the cave. "I can hear the iron clanging—but he's nay happy with his accommodations."

"Bloody hell, most smithies sleep on the hard floors in their shops—what kind of milk-livered…"

The blacksmith stepped out of the cave and held a sword up to the sunlight. Wearing a leather apron, the man must have weighed eighteen stone. His forearms alone were as thick as the galley's mast. The corner of Alan's mouth ticked up. "See to it he has first pick of the wenches next time the whores visit from the village. I could use muscle like that fifty times over."

After Alan hopped over the rail, he strode directly to the smithy and held out his hand. "Welcome. Alan MacCoul here."

The man offered a firm shake and a suspecting eye. "Walter, m'lord."

"I'm no man's lord." Alan smirked. "At least not as of yet. Tell me, is everything on Kerrera to your liking?"

The big man rubbed his backside. "Aye, but I could use a bit more hay for my pallet."

"Consider it done." Alan clapped the smithy's beefy shoulder. "I aim to ensure everyone shares in my success and I only ask for one thing in return."

"What would that be?"

"Loyalty." He uttered the word slowly to ensure there'd be no misunderstanding.

Gyllis lay on the bed and listened to Mother and Meg discuss her failing health. They likely thought she couldn't hear them. Though she could barely move, her ears and eyes had not been affected by the illness that plagued her.

"It has been over a week and she continues to decline." Across the room, Meg wrung her hands. "And now she's showing signs of paralysis. Her joints are stiff. I'm afraid her condition has gone beyond my abilities."

Mother cast a worried glance toward Gyllis. "This morn she could scarcely swallow her willow tea."

Meg crossed herself. "May God have mercy on our dear sister."

If Gyllis could have screamed, she would have. But presently her voice was but a garbled whisper, her throat raw and sore. She had no intention of dying. She couldn't. There were too many things she had yet to do in this life, bless it. Her head pounded and she closed her eyes, willing the pain away.

“I wish Duncan were here.” Mother covered her mouth with her palm. “Last eve I sent for John.”

Though Gyllis’s head throbbed, her heart squeezed at the idea of seeing her closest brother. John had joined the priesthood and now was the prior at Ardchattan. Gyllis rarely had the chance to see him, but enjoyed it immensely when she did. *If only he could make me better*.

“As a man of the cloth, I do believe he may be a better brother than Duncan. He’ll know what to do for certain,” Meg said. She’d always been pious, and though Gyllis adored her, she was growing rather tired of Duncan’s wife voicing her fears of doom.

“Mother,” Gyllis said, her voice croaking like a toad from the loch.

Ma hastened to her bedside and grasped her hand. “Aye, my sweeting?”

“When will John arrive?”

She cast a worried glance to Meg. “Soon—as soon as he can spirit away from the priory, I’ll ensure he comes straight up to see you.”

Gyllis tried to swallow and coughed. “I want to see him.”

“’Tis a good sign.” Mother patted her hand. “Drink some more tea whilst we wait.”

Meg reached for the cup while Mother helped Gyllis sit up. She could barely move her hands to grasp it. Meg helped her by tilting it back, but when the bitter brew hit her mouth, she erupted in a coughing fit. The tea spewed across the bedclothes and down the front of Mother’s apron.

Wheezing, Gyllis hung her head and tried to swipe her brow with her hand, but couldn’t lift the trembling appendage. “I’m sorry.”

Mother helped her recline and brushed at the wet spot. “You mustn’t worry. We should have used the spoon.”

Tears stung Gyllis’s eyes. “I hate this.”

“I know sweetheart. Do not worry overmuch, John will be here soon.” Mother patted her cheek. “You should rest until he arrives.”

With heavy eyelids, Gyllis nodded. “What is wrong with me?”

“I wish we knew,” said Meg. She brushed her fingers of her good hand over Gyllis’s hair. Meg had a cleft hand she called *the claw* that she tried to keep hidden for the most part. “One thing I do ken—you are a fighter, just like your father. You will not allow this illness to overcome you. Of that I am certain.”

Gyllis shivered and sank into the mountain of pillows the women had layered behind her back. If only this horrid sickness would pass, she could focus on regaining her strength. Mother and Meg headed toward the door, their voices muffled in hushed tones. Gyllis wanted to listen, but the effort was more than she could manage.

After the door closed, Meg pattered across the floor and sat on the

bed, picking up Gyllis's hand. "I've sent to the physician's council in Edinburgh and requested information on your symptoms. I'm not sure what my appeal will turn up, but I'll leave no stone unturned. Until then, the priory is the best place for you. The monks will be able to provide the care you need."

Gyllis licked her dry lips. "I do not want to go to Ardchattan. I'll be away from you and Helen."

"I ken." Meg lightly brushed her fingertips over the back of Gyllis's hand. "Helen told me things didn't go well for you at the Beltane festival."

"The first night, Sir Sean was so charming." A lump caught in her throat. "I cannot bring myself to speak of the rest."

"Well, if Sean MacDougall isn't the man for you, I'm sure we shall find another gallant knight who will adore you completely. Let us see to your recovery and then I will make it my duty to ensure Duncan has a line of suitors queued up to offer for your hand."

"*If* I ever do recover." The lump in her throat grew.

"Do not say that. Your illness may have knocked you about, but between John, the monks and what I can find, we shall see you set to rights."

"Thank you." Gyllis weakly brushed her thumb over Meg's finger. "Has Duncan returned from court?"

"Not as of yet," she sighed.

"I am sorry."

"No need. He shall be home as soon as the king's business is settled else we shall need to build a home in Stirling as well."

Gyllis emitted a rueful chuckle and then yawned. "If you want Elizabeth and Colin to know who their father is, that may be your best option."

Meg leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Sleep my dear. We shall wake you when John arrives."

"Gyllis?" a deep voice called her name. He spoke so softly, the tone soothed her. If only she could hear it again, but then she would have to wake. "Gyllis, lass," it came again.

She stirred. "Sean MacDougall, is that you calling my name?" She'd welcome a dream even of Sean to while away the body aches and sickness—for her dreams were the only place she'd ever again see him.

"Nay, 'tis your brother, John."

Gyllis opened her eyes, a faint smile splitting her upper lip with a sharp sting. "You came."

"And you still have your heart set on that MacDougall roustabout."

She attempted to raise her hand, but it was too heavy. "'Tis good

to see you."

Dressed in black robes, John looked ever so serious—a far cry from the lad who used to show her how to climb trees and net fish in Loch Awe. He tugged the bedclothes down slightly and grasped her shoulders. "What's ailing you?"

"It started with the sweat and shakes, and now my limbs ache so much I can hardly move."

He took one arm and massaged it between his large hands. "Does this feel good?"

"Aye."

He took each arm and rested them by her sides. "Now see if you can lift them."

With all her effort, Gyllis clenched her muscles and tried to raise her arms, but only the one John had rubbed rose off the bed."

John's brow creased. "Is that all the better you can do?"

Gyllis closed her eyes and bore down, trying to force her arms to rise.

John patted her shoulder. ""'Tis a fine effort. I do not want you to overexert yourself."

"Have you ever seen this before? Do you have any idea what's wrong with me?"

He frowned and brushed a wisp of hair from her face. "You've paralysis for certain."

A cry caught in her throat. "Is there a cure?" she whispered, dread filling her voice.

"I've seen it in the infirmary at the priory. It seems to attack its victims and linger." He scratched his chin and hummed. "If anyone can recover from this, 'tis you, but it will not be easy. God gave you a willful spirit for a reason."

He pulled the bedclothes up to her chin and gave her a pat. "I'll need to take you to Ardchattan Priory. The monks can care for you far better than Lady Meg—nothing against Duncan's wife, but you need more care than one person can give."

A tear slipped from Gyllis's eye. "Oh John, why has this happened to me? One day I was happy and gay and the next, I became so ill I was certain I would die."

"Only God knows the reason one person is afflicted and another is not." He stood and clasped his hands as if he were praying. "As his sheep, our role is to take our lot in life and make the best of it—be strong and trust in God to lead us through the dark shadows."

She wanted to wipe the tears from her eyes, but had not the strength to put forth the effort. "When did you become so wise?"

He offered a faint smile. "If only it were thus. Rest. I shall arrange a transport forthwith."

Chapter Seven

Sean and his men rode west toward Fearnoch Forest. Cattle thieving had begun before the effigy had been placed on his father's grave. *If the outlaws think they can cross me, they've another thing coming. And why did Da not send for me when I was on the borders? Every time the MacDougall drove out the vermin they were replaced by others? I've been battling lawlessness since I reached my majority. Now's the time to end it on my own lands.*

If the thieves thought they could take advantage of the MacDougalls because they were in mourning, they were sorely mistaken. "Did anyone see the backstabbing tinkers?"

Slapping his reins like he was beating a drum, Angus struggled to keep pace. "Nay."

"Six cattle thieved without a sign?" *I find that hard to believe*. A lot of things hadn't sat well with Sean since he started diving into the estate's affairs. And all had not been smooth whilst his father lived either. Small coin and livestock disappeared from the ledgers with a stroke of a pen. With each little adjustment Sean uncovered, his suspicion grew. That he had a traitor in his midst was certain. Who… was yet to be discovered.

"A rider approaches from the south," bellowed a sentry at the rear of the retinue.

Sean held up his hand and slowed his horse. Circling around, Fraser galloped toward them. Of all the MacDougall clansmen, Sean trusted him the most. They had been boyhood friends and Fraser often rode with him when carrying out Highland Enforcer tasks for the Lord of Glenorchy and the king.

"Another five head missing by the southern border."

Sean gaped. "Any sign of the thieves?"

"No, m'laird."

"That makes no sense at all—if the outlaws are holing up in Fearnoch Forest to the west, how are they slipping unseen to the south…and where are they driving *my* cattle?"

Angus rode in beside him and pulled up. "The two crimes could be unrelated."

Fraser's horse snorted and stomped its right front. "I reckon someone's testing your verve—trying to see what they can take from the new chieftain afore they get caught."

"They'll be caught and the risk is nay worth the gain." Sean looked up and watched a hawk circle overhead. "I've plenty of enemies, but only one comes to mind who'd go to so much trouble." He eyed

Angus.

The older man's shoulder ticked up. "I do not think Alan MacCoul would stoop so low, besides, he sailed off in his sea galley a fortnight ago."

Sean smirked. "I could never trust that bastard." He raised his voice and eyed all his men. "Where did MacCoul sail after he left Dunollie lands?"

No one said a word. He dug in his heels and walked his horse along the line of men. "We'll rid the wood of outlaws, but moreover, I want a scout on MacCoul's trail." He spun his horse and started back the other way. Right now there weren't many men he could trust—or who had the necessary skills to follow a cold trail. "Hell, I'll find him myself. I'm the best damn tracker in the Highlands."

"That you are," Fraser said.

"Do you think it wise to leave your lands so soon after you've taken up your father's mantle?" Angus asked. "There are a great many affairs needing your attention."

Sean had always trusted his father's henchman, but presently he questioned the man's loyalty.

"MacDougall!" A rider galloped from the direction of Dunollie. "I've a missive from the Lord of Lorn."

Sean threw up his hands. "Does everyone ken our whereabouts?"

"I didn't think it was a secret," Angus said.

Sean pointed at the laggard's sternum. "We need a sober discussion, you and I." He beckoned the messenger. "Come."

Sean took the missive and ran his finger under his uncle's red-wax seal and read.

"What is it?" Angus asked.

"My uncle…ah…has requested a meeting." He wasn't about to say where or when—not to Angus and most definitely not in front of all his men when there could be a backstabber about. He needed to learn whom he could trust and whom he couldn't and fast. Unfortunately, his uncle's summons changed Sean's plans.

He stuffed the missive in his doublet. "Angus, take the men and drive out any outlaws in the wood. Fraser, find out where MacCoul sailed after he left the clan. Better yet, find out where he's holing up and report back. I want to see you at Dunollie within a fortnight." He grasped his friend's shoulder and squeezed. "Do not fail me."

"On my way, m'laird."

"Trevor's galley approaches, sir," Brus hollered from the cave entrance.

With two more rutting thrusts, Alan ground his teeth with a grunt and finished swiving the whore he had shoved up against the cave's

wall. Pulling up his trews, he shook himself off, revived at the relief of tension the quick hump had brought.

He expected good news. Hiding out on this God-forsaken island didn't suit him. The damp made his bones ache and his temperament border on the verge of tyrannical—not that intimidation was a problem. It was a tactic he used even when he wasn't feeling like an ogre.

Brus caught the mooring rope while the galley ran aground on the beach.

Followed by his men, Trevor hopped over the side, a daft grin spread across his face.

"Well?" Alan asked, leaving the whore in a tousled heap.

"Easier than taking a Sunday stroll with my ma," Trevor boasted.

"Out with it, man. I want details."

"Two bands thieved cattle. One to the west and the other to the south—exactly as you said." He dug in his purse. "I sold the beasts to a transport headed to Glasgow—Eleven marks, one for each head, less payment for me and the men."

Alan snatched the coin and counted it. Trevor had taken the agreed quarter. He didn't like that his men had taken their share first—but if he challenged the brigands with coin in their pockets, their loyalty would wane. "Did you see any trouble?"

"Nay—could thieve the laird's cattle every day, I'd reckon."

Alan was no fool. "If you tried tomorrow, you'd be caught for certain."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The alarm's raised by now. It will not be half as easy next time—besides how much torture could any one of your men take if caught?" Alan adjusted his crotch. "We shall lay low for a time—travel to visit our allies in the Lowlands where we do not have to hide in a cave."

The men nodded in agreement.

"Walter," Alan hollered over his shoulder.

The smithy stepped out from the cave's shadows. "Aye?"

"While we're away I want you to fashion irons for a man."

"You mean you're not taking me with you?"

"You heard me."

The blacksmith knuckled his head and glanced at the woman Alan had just discarded. "You'll leave the whore?"

"Very well."

"All right, then, but I'll need measurements."

Alan gestured to his body. "My size, but a hand taller."

Walter shook his head. "Tis nay that easy—"

"Just see it done. I'll hear no more from naysayers." Alan turned to Trevor and Brus. "We sail at dawn."

Propped up with pillows, Gyllis closed her eyes and yielded to the monk's gentle ministrations. She'd been in the cell at Ardchattan Priory for a month now and, though the sickness had passed, the paralysis still plagued her. Even her breathing had become shallow and labored. She closed her eyes. Dark thoughts of a life as a cripple blackened her mind. She'd be a burden to her family—or to the priory unless by some miracle, God saw fit to give her the strength to walk again.

"I'll wager things are not as comfortable here for you as they are at Kilchurn Castle," Brother Wesley said in his ever-soothing voice. He had a sallow complexion with grey eyes, black hair, and his front teeth were large and crooked. It was difficult not to stare at them on the rare occasion he smiled.

How different and ever so mundane things were cloistered behind the priory walls. Nothing exciting ever happened—she never heard a voice raised or the clanging of swords when the guard sparred as she'd heard daily at Kilchurn Castle. The dangers of the world seemed a hundred miles away.

Gyllis glanced at the stark walls with a single wooden cross nailed above her head—aside from the bed, the only piece of furniture was a wooden stool. Brother Wesley looked at her expectantly.

"Aye, my chamber is five times the size of this cell," she answered. "And the bed is far softer than this cot." Indeed, she'd prefer to be home now.

He pressed the heel of his hand into her thigh and rubbed with a circular motion. Had he not taken an oath of celibacy, Gyllis could never have permitted him to care for her. "With God's grace, we shall have you up in no time. I'm sure you are anxious to return to your kin."

"If I could spring from this bed this moment, I would."

"You must take one thing at a time. 'Tis a long process to recover from a disease like paralysis." He patted her leg then resituated her skirts. "Let us see how your arms are faring today."

Her fingers twitched and she closed her eyes. Clamping her teeth and scrunching her face with effort, she forced herself to lift them from the bed. Sucking in a gasp, the worthless limbs dropped back down. She glared at Brother Wesley. "They're useless."

He lifted her hand and held it in his palm, offering a serene smile as if he had not a care. "You raised them twice as far as yesterday. I am impressed with your progress."

If only Gyllis could share in his subdued exuberance. If Brother Wesley were to raise one of his thick eyebrows, it would be an untoward display of emotion. "I most certainly am not pleased. Do

you have any idea how miserable it is to lie on this cot hour upon hour unable to move?" And now she'd begun to suffer from bed sores.

"It must be very monotonous indeed."

"'Tis unbearable."

The monk frowned. "I shall continue to pray for you, Miss Gyllis."

That's all she'd heard since arriving at this miserable priory. "Praying? What good will that do? I cannot even feed myself—and the indignity of being changed like a bairn." She turned her face toward the wall and groaned.

"I am sorry—I shall continue to try to help, though my efforts have not met with your satisfaction."

Gyllis cringed. She'd just insulted the kindest, gentlest person she'd ever met. Devil's bones, this illness turned her into a curmudgeon. "Apologies, I did not mean to imply your ministrations have not been met with my sincerest gratitude." She took in a deep breath and willed the air to fill her limbs right through her fingers. With her exhale, her hands rose at least six inches. She chuckled and glanced at Brother Wesley.

"Praise be to God, Miss Gyllis." He stood and clapped his palms together. "I do believe the Lord's strength just showed the greatness of its power right through the tips of your fingers."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Let me try again." She closed her eyes. *Please, please, please*. Once more her hands rose from the bed. They trembled a bit, but she'd done it. No matter how small the win, it was something. She splayed her fingers. Without telling Brother Wesley, she tried to wiggle her toes. Possibly the toes on the right foot moved. She couldn't be certain.

The door opened and John stepped inside, holding a lute and a parcel. He grimaced at Brother Wesley and bowed his head. "Have I interrupted you?"

"I was just finishing." The monk straightened and smiled. "Miss Gyllis lifted her arms further than ever before."

John smiled. "Very good news."

"Indeed." Wesley bowed. "I should prepare for vespers."

"I shall be in the nave shortly." John sat on the stool beside her bed. "Mother sent a few things."

Gyllis eyed the lute in his hands, her spirits again sinking. "I doubt I'll ever have the wherewithal to play that again."

The cell was so small, he simply leaned back to place the instrument in the corner across from the bed. "We'll keep it here until you are ready." He reached inside the satchel and pulled out a book. "You might start with this first. We can prop you up and I'll wager you'll be able to turn the pages since you can raise your arms a bit."

Gyllis squinted at the title. *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame*

Ragnelle & other Romantic Tales. “My heavens, ’tis not the Holy Bible?”

John smoothed his palm over the leather binding—with light dun hair, her brother posed a handsome man. “I suppose Mother thought you’d prefer something lighter, though I’d be more than happy to replace this with a Bible from my own library.”

Gyllis’s fingers twitched, if only she could snatch the book from his hands and cradle it to her chest. She may never find romance for herself, but she certainly could live it through the text on the page. She’d read *The Legend of King Arthur* over and over until she could recite lengthy passages. “Please, can I start now?”

“Very well.” He glanced around the tiny cell. “Perhaps you’ll be able to read if I rest it in your lap.” He opened the book to the first page then lifted Gyllis’s arms and placed them across her lap.

Instantly she was transported by the mystical knight, Sir Gromer Somer Joure as he challenged King Arthur to discover what women desire most. Anxious to turn the page, her fingers twitched, her arm moved spasmodically and knocked the book from its perch.

John slid it back in place, but kept it open to the page she’d already read.

Grinding her teeth, Gyllis concentrated, focusing on the simple task of turning the page. When at last her feeble hand grasped the velum, her motion jerked, and the cursed book clattered to the stone floor. A cry caught in her throat. “Bless it, I am completely useless.”

“I’ll fetch it.” He retrieved the book and again set it on her lap.

Gyllis shook her head. “No. What use is it if I cannot turn the pages myself?” She looked at the ceiling and wailed. She couldn’t even clench her miserable fists. “My God, why has this happened to me? What did I do to deserve a life in purgatory?”

John placed his hand on her arm. “There, there. You mustn’t fret.”

“But I can do nothing without help.” A tear spilled down her cheek. “It would have been better if God had taken my life than to have left me paralyzed with no prospects of recovery.”

“I wouldn’t say that. You’ve made progress.”

“D-do you honestly believe that, John?” Uncontrollable sobs racked her body. It had been ages and ages since she fell ill—and she hated every moment of her confinement. “I am the most worthless lass who ever lived. I cannot even hold a miserable book. I’ll never walk again. I’ll never be courted by a dashing knight. I’ll never bear children.” She wiped her miserable nose on her shoulder because she couldn’t—possibly never would be able to—use a worthless kerchief. “I am nothing.”

Chapter Eight

Sean couldn't remember the last time he'd been to Ardchattan Priory, but he was looking forward to the prospect of seeing John Campbell, the prior. After the untimely death of John and Duncan's father, the younger son had left the Highland Enforcers to become a priest. Sean hated to see him go. He was a fine knight and a better friend.

He raised the blackened iron knocker on the cloister gate and rapped it twice.

Not long and a monk slid open the viewing panel. "Yes?"

"Sean MacDougall here, Chieftain of Dunollie. I've come to meet the Lord of Lorn, has he arrived as of yet?"

"Afraid not." The monk moved to shut the screen.

Sean thrust the hilt of his dirk into the opening before it closed. "Then perhaps I may have a word with the prior. John Campbell and I were boyhood friends."

A single eye peered through the gap. "I shall inquire if he is able to receive visitors."

The monk slid the panel closed. To Sean's surprise, the hinges on the big black gate creaked. When the door opened, the monk gestured to a bench in the cloister, walled on one side, hedged by a row of trimmed holly on the other. "Wait here."

Sean sat as directed. He crossed and uncrossed his legs, folded his arms, whistled a tune and then he stood. Not one to be idle, he paced. Behind the hedge someone chuckled. *A woman's voice.*

He peered over the shrubbery but saw no one. Only a few steps from the courtyard entrance, he walked to the break in the hedge and peeked around. A woman wrapped in blankets sat on a bench directly opposite from where Sean had been sitting. She wore a plain white veil atop her head and was looking down—in fact she was reading.

The book must have been interesting because her shoulders shook as if she might be laughing. If only he could see the joy upon her face, he'd enjoy a good laugh himself.

The woman's hands trembled and she slowly reached to turn the page—as if she were very old—though her fine-boned hands appeared smooth and ageless. Her shoulders tensed as she struggled to grasp the vellum. Sean cringed at her effort.

What illness afflicts the lass?

When she finally had the page turned, the blasted thing flipped back the other way.

"Argh." The agony in her voice clawed at Sean's heart.

He strode forward and plucked the book from her fingers. "Please.

Allow me."

The woman gasped as if she'd been accosted.

Sean glanced at her face and froze. In that instant, his heart stopped, his mouth dried and his stomach plummeted to his toes.

He knew her. Cared for her. But something was terribly wrong. In that moment, she appeared so vexed and more so, stricken by horror. Christ, she was so skeletally thin, but he could never mistake the pair of mossy green eyes encircled by rings of navy blue.

He swallowed. "Gyllis?" he asked, his voice filled with disbelief.

She quickly averted her face. "Go away."

"It *is* you." Sean knelt beside her. "My God, what happened?"

Her shoulders tensed and she moved a trembling hand to block her face, seemingly afraid of catching a disease from him.

He wanted to place his palm upon her shoulder, but stopped himself by clutching the book tighter. "You're so frail and thin." He cast his mind back. "Yet a mere two months have passed since Beltane…"

"Please, return my book and leave me be."

Why was she being so despondent? They were friends—more than friends, for the love of God. "Will you not look at me—tell me what ails you?"

She snapped her head around, tears welling in her eyes. Unimaginable pain and anguish stretched her features. "Must you taunt me?"

The words came out as if she'd slapped him. "I would never do that." He knelt beside her. "Tell me what happened…why are you here?"

The fire that flashed through her eyes was akin to hate. What suffering had caused such bitterness? "As if you would care about me, Sean MacDougall. I'll not have you make a mockery of me, not ever again." Her voice choked. "Go. Live your life and forget I ever existed."

Sean reached for her hand and squeezed. *A mockery? Not ever again? She couldn't possibly mean that?* He'd always adored Gyllis, always thought of her as his… He blinked successively. Why was she acting thus? "Please—"

"Sir Sean." A monk hastened toward him, brown robes billowing. "The Lord of Lorn has arrived. He's asked to meet with you at once."

"I must go." Sean regarded Gyllis and placed the book on her lap. "I'd like to visit you again."

She stared at the volume. "'Tis best if you did not."

Sean's heart twisted with her every bitter word. Never had she been discourteous toward him. Why did Lorn have to be in such a damned hurry? He would have liked to find out more, but presently

the lass proved none too eager to talk.

He pursed his lips and grasped her hand. Bowing his head, he pondered at the frailty of the fingers in his palm, whilst he savored her sweet fragrance. It had always captivated him. Closing his eyes, he pictured the Gyllis he knew—the lass with the free spirit and easy laugh. He placed a gentle kiss on her hand and straightened. “Until we meet again, Miss Gyllis.”

The monk beckoned him. “This way. Prior John said he would attend you after.”

Walking away, Sean cast one last glimpse over his shoulder. Gyllis watched him out of the corner of her eye. That something dreadful had happened was a certainty. What, he intended to find out before he left.

Gyllis stared at the book in her hands, except she couldn’t see it through the tears filling her eyes. If she could have curled into a ball and died she would have. How long had Sir Sean been watching before she attempted to turn the page?

She never wanted anyone to see her feebly try to accomplish something she’d done with ease only months ago. Tears ran down her cheeks. She sucked in a deep breath to stifle her weeping, but it only served to heighten her remorse.

Had he any idea how much it tore her apart to see him again? And he made no mention of why he’d broken his promise to sit on her plaid. Aye, it was a simple matter, but it had been a savage cut to her heart. *Why, I mightn’t have become so ill if it weren’t for my broken heart*.

Her nose was running and it streamed over her lips, spreading an unwelcome, salty taste in her mouth. She opened and closed her fist. Blast it to hell. In one determined motion, she raised her hand and swiped it across her face. She blinked rapidly and stared at her fingers.

“Heaven’s stars.”

She raised the trembling hand again, but this time she missed her face altogether. That she’d first connected with her head at all must have been accidental.

Groaning, she cast her gaze to the clouds above. Everything about Sean MacDougall reminded her of the fool she’d been. Happiness was only a fleeting speck given the duration of one’s life. How could she have ever expected to live happily? She smirked at the book on her lap—the pages were full of fairytales—events that could never come true.

At least now she had no illusions. With life came pain and humiliation. She could not even visit the privy closet without assistance. *How much worse can things become?*

Forced to succumb to the monk’s ministrations like a bairn still in

swaddling clothes, she hated being dependent on someone for her every need. Everyone around her shot pitying glances her way. She didn't want pity, she wanted freedom.

This situation is untenable. She clenched her fists. *I will walk again*. With effort, she folded her hands and closed her eyes. *God in heaven, give me strength to overcome this illness*.

Pushing the book aside, she bore down and swung her legs over the side of the bench. Her head swooning with the effort, she took in a deep breath. Sliding to the edge, she placed her slippered feet on the ground, just as she'd done many times with the assistance of Brother Wesley.

But this time she was far more determined.

With her palms flush against the bench, she shifted her weight onto her legs and pushed up. Wobbling with exertion, standing was excruciatingly slow. Her heart fluttered when, for the first time in two months, she stood unassisted.

Her legs shuddering, Gyllis eyed the grass before her. *One step*.

Swallowing, she inched her foot forward.

Her knee buckled. Gyllis cried out. Before she could fling her arms forward, she landed face-first in the moist grass.

"Miss Gyllis," Brother Wesley cried as he hastened to her side. "Whatever are you doing?"

Her nose throbbed and she stretched her jaw to the side only to be met with a sharp pain. "My, that hurt." Dear Brother Wesley, always rushing to her aid. If only she didn't need his charity. He was a selfless and giving monk, and right now Gyllis needed him far more than she wanted to admit.

"You mustn't do that again—not without assistance." He gathered her in his beefy arms. "Let us see you back inside."

She looked him in the eye. "Mark me—I *will* walk again and show Sir Sean MacDougall I can overcome anything."

Concern creased Brother Wesley's brow. "Did he upset you?"

The monk led Sean beyond the cloister walls to the stables where the Lord of Lorn waited with his men. Sean held out his hand in greeting. "Uncle, I must say I'm eager to hear what you have brewing, given the secrecy."

With a grin, Lorn offered a firm handshake. "And I'm all too eager to share it with you." He inclined his head to a path leading into the wood. "Come, walk with me—away from prying ears."

Sean cast a sideways glance to Lorn's men. Could the earl not trust his inner circle? *I suppose I shall find out*.

Together they walked into the wood along a well-kept path, one obviously used by the priory monks on a regular basis.

Lorn plucked a maple leaf and twirled it between his fingers. “How have you been coping since your father’s death?”

“Well enough.” Sean shrugged. “A few head of cattle have gone missing, but nothing too alarming.”

“How many head have disappeared?”

“Ten or so—two different raids.”

“You must stop all insurgence, else you’ll have an uprising you cannot control.”

“No need to worry overmuch about me.” They came to a split in the trail and Sean chose the wider, more traveled path—though he’d rather have taken the overgrown one had he not been accompanied by the older man. “I reckon we’re far enough away from the others. What is so important to make you opt to meet here?”

“One can never know whom they can trust.” Lorn eyed him. “Especially a young chieftain who’s only come into his title.”

Sean gaped. “You no longer trust me?”

“’Tis not you, but rather your men. To prove my point, you just said yourself Dunollie’s suffering from raids.”

Sean opened his mouth for a rebuttal, but Lorn held up his hand. “’Tis always the way when a new pup rises to power. Someone feels thwarted and wants to test your grit. Deal with reivers firmly. In a few months, things will again settle.”

Sean didn’t want to admit he had a few misgivings about the loyalties of some of his father’s men. However, this conversation cemented his decisions. He must weed out the conspirators quickly. “You’ve no cause for alarm.”

“That is what I like to hear.” Lorn plucked another leaf—a birch this time. “I wanted to meet with you in secret because I’ve given it a great deal of thought and have decided to act on your suggestion.”

Sean looked toward the clouds, rifling through his memory of the last time he’d seen Lorn—*Beltane*. What the devil had they talked about? “I beg your pardon?”

“Must I spell it out?”

With no idea, Sean shrugged.

“Since May I’ve given it ample thought and come up with no other option. I’m to wed Dugald’s mother.”

Sean grinned. Now he remembered the conversation. And that had been the first time in his life he’d realized that at nine and twenty, he was aging. Had his uncle finally come to his senses? “At last you will make your son legitimate?”

“Aye.” Lorn glanced over his shoulder as if he feared someone was following. “But you must keep it quiet, lest my enemies learn of my plans—especially Argyll and the Campbell lot.”

“Heavens, Uncle, the Campbell Clan could be your greatest allies—

especially the Glenorchy sect."

Lorn flicked his leaf into the brush. "Mayhap, however, I'd prefer if you kept it between us."

"Very well." Sean stepped around a mud puddle. "What do you need from me?"

Lorn stopped and craned his neck to face him. "Protection. I need your army to provide ample guard during the ceremony and the feast."

Sean remembered well the lands Lorn had bequeathed him when he reached his majority. The gift was given on the promise a call to arms would be forthcoming whenever needed. "You'll have my sword and my men. Have you set a date as of yet?"

"Autumn—when the leaves start to turn."

"Why wait?" Sean asked. "You should have brought Mary MacLaren to the priory and had John Campbell marry you this day."

Lorn waved his hands. "No, no, that will not do. There are formalities to arrange—the first being a visit to King James to ensure his blessing."

Sean was no stranger to the dealings of court. "And his sanction of lands."

"Of course. The only reason I'm proceeding with the marriage at my advanced age is to ensure my title remains with my line."

Sean chuckled. "And the Earl of Argyll doesn't inherit the Lordship of Lorn."

"Exactly."

Sean glanced toward a raven squawking at them from a tree limb above. "You are aware, the king's enforcers could add iron-clad protection for you and your bride." He didn't want to use the moniker Highland Enforcers. That had originally been the label used by Black Colin Campbell and it had stuck. Everyone knew there was no force in the Highlands that could match the well-trained group of knights led by Lord Duncan Campbell, but Lorn would never admit dependence.

The older man clapped Sean on the shoulder and headed back toward the priory. "Let us keep this quiet for now. The fewer people who know my plans, the less likely my enemies will cross me."

"Agreed."

"In the interim, you need to see to it you weed out all backstabbers from your clan."

Sean balled his fists. "No one wants that more than I."

"'Tis good to hear."

After seeing the Lord of Lorn off, Sean returned to the garden, but Gyllis was no longer there. He looked at the sundial. The afternoon was growing late and soon the monks would head to the nave for

vespers. He turned full circle. Could Gyllis be staying in the dormitory? It wasn't usual for monks to take in the sick, but he had no idea if Ardchattan had an infirmary.

One thing he knew for certain, he wouldn't find her whilst turning circles in the garden. When he headed toward the cloisters, John stepped around the corner.

Sean opened his arms. "Just the man I was looking for."

"Sean MacDougall." With a hearty laugh, John pulled him into an embrace. "Bless it, 'tis good to see you."

"Bloody oath." Sean stepped away and took in the telltale black robes. "How long has it been?"

"Years." John gestured for him to continue walking. "Word has it you're the Chieftain of Dunollie now."

"Aye. Da passed two months ago."

"I am sorry." John bowed his head. "I shall pray for his eternal soul."

"My thanks." Sean grasped John's sleeve and rubbed it between his fingers. "So you've attained the exalted rank of prior in record time, I see."

"Aye, I've found my calling—no more armor and swords for me."

"Or women."

John frowned.

Sean shook his head. "Bloody waste of a fine knight."

"You sound like my brother."

"Apologies." He clapped the priest on the back. "I should be offering congratulations."

"No need. We live a life of humility here, void of pride."

That certainly was the man Sean knew. John Campbell never could be accused of suffering from the sin of pride—something Sean envied in his friend. *Envy, yet another sin*. But he had something of a more serious nature to discuss. "I saw Miss Gyllis when I first arrived."

"Aye, she mentioned as much." John frowned.

But Sean didn't let the dour face dissuade him. "What happened to her?"

"Paralysis."

Sean gulped. "'Tis worse than I thought. She looks so frail. When did she become afflicted?"

"She fell ill on the journey home from the May Day festival."

"That long ago? What are her chances of recovery?"

John steepled his fingers. "Who knows? The longer she goes without being able to walk, the less likely she will ever find her legs."

"My God." Sean pushed his hands through his hair. "I must help her."

"What do you think you can do?" John stopped outside the chapel

doors and faced him. “She was very upset after she saw you—refused to eat—I couldn’t even get her to take a sip of mead.”

His mind swimming, Sean barely listened. “But we’ve been close ever since we were young. I always thought…” He couldn’t say it, not to her brother. “I want to see her.”

“I’m not certain ’tis a good idea.” John grasped the latch. “Whatever happened between you two?”

“Pardon me? We’ve always been…” He almost said sweethearts, but that wouldn’t sound right confessing to a priest, or to her brother, no less. “Good friends.”

“Something about your visit upset her. What did you say?”

“Me? Nothing at all.” Sean grasped John’s elbow. “Please, I want to see Gyllis again.”

John sighed and looked to the sky. “I should not agree, but you seem emphatic—and I do not approve of leaving things on a sour note. Give her a sennight or two. She’s so frail. Any upset could ruin her progress.”

“Must I wait that long? I’d prefer to return on the morrow.”

“Please, I ask you to heed me in this.” John placed his hand on Sean’s shoulder. “For Gyllis’s sake.”

“Very well, if your request is for her benefit.” Sean clenched his teeth—Gyllis was exactly who he had been thinking of, but good sense told him not to argue, else he could be banned. “My thanks.”

“No need for gratitude.” John held up a finger. “If she has an adverse reaction on your next visit, I shall have no recourse but to request that you stay away.”

Mounted on his warhorse, Sean puzzled while he rode the six miles back to Dunollie Castle. Beltane seemed like it had happened years ago, yet it had only been a couple months. At the feast, he’d danced with Gyllis. She’d never looked so radiant—healthy and lively on her feet. How quickly the paralysis must have come on.

He chuckled, remembering how delightfully forward she’d been. Ah yes, and the kiss he’d stolen in the garden had been sublime. That she had never been properly kissed was a certainty and it made his blood thrum to think he’d been the first gentleman to claim her lips. His grin stretched wider.

She invited me to sit on her plaid—and then Angus and Jinny came to tell me Da had died.

Sean pulled his horse to a stop and slapped his forehead.

God’s teeth, I neglected to send my apologies. Has anyone informed her as to why I’d been called away?

Chapter Nine

Gyllis sat sideways on her bed, reclining into a mountain of pillows propped against the wall. John massaged the sole of her foot—the feeling must have been returning because it caused a mildly painful sensation of pin pricks.

She squeezed her eyes shut. A picture formed of Sir Sean and how horrified his face had looked when he first saw her in the garden. Every time she thought about Sean MacDougall, Gyllis shook her head and forced her mind to focus on anything else. Presently, the story of how Sir Gawain had opted to allow Dame Ragnelle to choose whether or not she would be cursed by ugliness during the day or at night replaced imaginings of Sean's azure eyes. Gyllis loved how Sir Gawain's selflessness resulted in breaking the spell and thus turned Dame Ragnelle into a beauty forever. If only such chivalry existed.

She sighed.

If only Sir Sean could do something to break the miserable spell that plagues me. She tsked her tongue. *Curses, there I go again, finding any way to allow that lusty laddie into my thoughts.*

"Push the sole of your foot against my hand," said John, seated upon the stool beside her bed. He had been helping her more as of late, and for the past week, Brother Wesley had been away on an errand to Iona.

Gyllis grasped the bedclothes and squeezed. Though the dexterity in her hands had not fully returned, in the past fortnight she'd become adept at turning the pages of her book. Threading a needle was yet to be accomplished. She grimaced and tried to push against John's hand with all her might. Though her forehead perspired, he seemed not to be putting forth any effort at all. Gyllis let out a puff of air. "Blast it."

"Keep trying."

She wanted to scream. "I *am.*"

"Good." John grinned—he could calm an entire room of grumblers with his smile. "Now just a bit harder."

Gyllis pushed. "Och, you are killing me."

"Simply trying to make you stronger." He rubbed his knuckles into the sole of her foot. "You made a good effort."

"Thank you." She watched him while he lifted her other foot and started in massaging her leg. He was so different compared to Duncan. Her older brother was a commander of men, a warlord and chieftain. Somehow, John had inherited all the traits to make him Duncan's opposite. Though they both had inherited the Campbell good looks.

"What do you aspire to, John?"

"Me?" He chuckled. "I suppose to spread the word of God and tend

wee lasses like you who come to the priory in need of care." It was typical of him to respond with something vague.

Gyllis persisted. "Do you ever miss riding with the Highland Enforcers?"

"Not really. I enjoyed the companionship, but I never could stomach living by the sword."

She adjusted her shoulders against the pillows for added comfort. "I suppose it would be unsettling to ride into battle knowing it could be your last day on this earth."

"It wasn't my death I was worried about so much as worry for others. Even vile men who've committed crimes have souls. I never believed I had a right to take a life—not ever."

Gyllis admired his handsome face, now framed by dun-colored locks with the top of his head shaven. "You would have made a fine husband."

"And you talk too much." He kneaded his fingers into her thigh. "What about you? You should be thinking about marriage soon."

She rolled her eyes to the cross on the wall above her head. "Oh, you are full of practicality—all lassies stricken with paralysis leap from their beds and proceed to the altar."

"I'm serious. You are beautiful and charming." John looked up and narrowed his gaze. "Why only a fortnight or so ago, Sir Sean MacDougall inquired about you—he showed genuine concern."

Gyllis harrumphed. "Sir Sean is the last person I'd marry. Besides, he's the type to take his vows and the following day ride off with Duncan and never look back."

"I suppose he has an adventuresome spirit—though I've not met a more trustworthy friend."

"I cannot fill my head with thoughts about that man. He's vile." Her voice trailed off and she swallowed. If only she could actually *void* her heart of her feelings for Sir Sean. Before she'd fallen ill, he had thwarted her. How would he treat her now that she was a cripple? "Let us talk about something else."

"Very well." John reverted to long languid strokes that made Gyllis's leg tingle. "I've been thinking. When you return to Kilchurn, we could move your things to the first floor solar."

Gyllis shook her head. "When I return to Kilchurn, I will be walking and able to climb the tower stairs."

John stopped rubbing and looked up. Sadness filled his eyes. "What if…"

"Do not say it. I…I am making progress." Gyllis strained to pull her foot from his grasp. "I will walk again, whether God sees fit to help me or I am forced to do it on my own."

"I appreciate your fighting spirit, but…."

“But what?”

“As humans we are only flesh and blood. Sometimes we can picture our bodies doing things they’re incapable of.”

“Enough!” Gyllis scooted to the edge of the bed and inched her feet onto the floor.

John stood and held out his hands. “Let me help you.”

“No. I’ll do it myself.”

His lips formed a thin line, but he took a step back.

She leaned forward until her chin was over her knees. Giving herself a healthy shove, Gyllis attempted to stand. Her legs faltered. With a startled gasp, her weight shifted too far forward. Having given too much of a push, she teetered then fell straight into John’s outstretched arms.

A wail caught in her throat. She balled her fists and pounded them into her brother’s chest. “Curses, curses, curses to paralysis! Why did this happen to me? Why can I not walk away from this damnable bed? I hate this. I hate it, I tell you!” Gyllis had been sick for so long, she couldn’t take it anymore—couldn’t face her miserable life. She was hopeless, useless and without a single prospect.

When she burst into tears, John lifted her into his arms and sat on the cot. Oh his lap he cradled her for what seemed like an eternity, patiently rocking back and forth while she bawled like a bairn. “There, there, Gyllis. Everything will be all right.” His soothing voice calmed until sleep took away her pain.

Swaying in his saddle, Murdach, pointed. “There she is, m’laird.”

Sean had never been so happy to see the ominous outline of the Dunollie battlements looming against a sultry summer sky. They had spent the last fortnight visiting every crofter who paid rents. True, Sean relished being on the trail, but this excursion with his factor had no adventure. And though this mission had been extremely important to renewing and securing loyalty, he was relieved it was at an end.

Chatting with clansmen about the rents wasn’t at the top of his list of entertaining subjects. If a crofter’s rents were up to date, the conversation turned to more interesting pursuits. But more often the people who made a living off his lands had fallen behind, and thus it was necessary to sit down and discuss a plan to set their accounts back to rights.

Murdach had been some help, but the aging factor proved to prefer his quill over his tongue.

Sean grinned at the portly man, then turned round to face his guard. “Let us make haste and we shall enjoy Dunollie whisky tonight.” He dug his heels into his horse’s barrel and led the canter along the shoreline to the castle.

Once inside the gates, he led them to the stables and dismounted.

Murdach hopped off his gelding with a grunt. “Will you be needing me for anything else, m’laird?”

“Nay. Put the ledgers in my solar and then go home to your lady wife.”

“My thanks.”

Sean gave his reins to his squire and sighed. Even the air at Dunollie smelled fresher than it did outside her walls.

“M’laird.” The man’s voice came from behind.

Sean whipped around and a grin spread across his face. “Fraser!” He embraced his friend and slapped him on the back. “I was wondering what had happened to you.”

The warrior’s eyebrows drew together and he inclined his head away from the guard. “May I have a word in confidence?”

“Of course.” Sean led him to the rear of the stables. “Did you find Alan?”

“Aye, at least where he’d been hiding.”

Sean rolled his hands in anticipation of more.

“An eyewitness reported he was holding up on Kerrera.”

Sean drummed his fingers to his lips. “That island is chartered MacDougall land.”

“Aye, but Alan told her it was his.”

“Her—a woman?”

“A whore named Osla.”

Sean smirked. “Credible source.”

“She wasn’t the most refined of women even for a whore, but she described him well enough—described his men, too.” Fraser frowned, his gaze darting left then right. He leaned in. “She said he’s amassing quite an army.”

Sean didn’t believe it. “I ken he’s got a following of roustabouts, but an *army*? She must have been jesting.”

“I’m nay so certain. She kent a number of names—and clans. Said he’s not only got disgruntled MacDougalls, he’s drawn in some lowlife Campbells and it gets worse.”

“Aye?”

“Lowlanders—hundreds of them. Osla said that’s where he is now.”

“In the Lowlands?”

“Aye—training for a reckoning.”

Sean studied the concern on Fraser’s face then swiped his hand over his mouth. “It sounds like the old hen grasped ahold of your ear and gave it a good tug.”

“I ken, it sounds farfetched, but Alan is a snake. I wouldn’t put it past him to be scheming something.”

“True, but I doubt he has the coin or the gumption to command an

army. A handful of vagrants, I'd believe but no more."

Fraser scratched his beard and glanced away. "I'm sure you're right, but why not let me track him to the Lowlands—see for myself if the whore's claims have any merit."

Sean glanced over his shoulder to ensure no one was eavesdropping. "I'd rather have you by my side as henchman. I trust you more than any other in the Clan MacDougall. You're the best with a sword, too."

"Thank you, m'laird, but my gut is telling me Alan MacCoul is up to something. I wouldn't feel content to leave things unresolved with that man and his *army*."

Sean reflected on Lorn's advice. There had been raids and any threat must be investigated no matter how absurd. "Very well, but I do not want you traveling to the Lowlands alone. Choose two guards with whom to ride and I'll expect to see you return in a month—two at the most."

When Sean retired to his solar, he poured himself a well-deserved glass of whisky. He stood at the window for a moment and gazed out over the Firth of Lorn. A sultry breeze caressed his face and he sighed. Summer had always been his favorite season. The gardens were alive with greens and colorful flowers and the sea yielded an abundant harvest.

Sean sipped his whisky and savored the oaken flavor as it slid over his tongue. Every moment he'd been away, he had thought about Gyllis. *I shall set out for the priory at first light.* He turned and looked at the ledgers spread out on the table. *But first I must make some sense of Murdach's chicken scratch.*

With a sigh, he placed a quill and inkwell on the table and sat in his upholstered chair. He spread a sheet of vellum to his right, opened a ledger and began to record sums, listing them in an orderly fashion as he deciphered the random splotches of ink made by his factor.

Two pages in, Sean had no doubt Murdach was blind. *That's bloody wonderful—how the devil hadn't Da noticed all the errors?*

A breeze blew in from the window and mussed the parchment. Sean glanced toward the sound of the roaring sea. Oh to be shed of responsibility and walking along the shore at sunset. *Holding Gyllis's hand.* Warmth spread through him. *Paralysis? I want to be the one massaging her thighs, not some recalcitrant monk.*

But will she accept my help? She told me to stay away. How can I possibly do that? I've cared for her since... He thought back to all the times he and Gyllis had danced or talked or shared a meal together during his fostering. *I've been such a dolt all these years. I should have asked her father for her hand whilst he was still alive. If only I'd had the*

sense to do so.

And now she's…

He shook his head and stopped himself.

Ballocks. I need to see her.

After inking his quill, he calculated the sum of his figures. He then compared it to the balance written on the ledger. *Short by five crowns*.

The hour was growing late, but he couldn't rest before he rechecked the numbers. After deciphering Murdach's entries a second time, Sean again came up with a five-crown shortfall. It wasn't a huge amount in comparison to his vast holdings, but over the course of a year, such losses would add up. He rested the quill in the silver holder and reached for his whisky.

Shall I confront Murdach first thing in the morning or head to the priory to see Gyllis? His mind made up, Sean closed the ledgers, rolled the vellum of sums and secured it inside his doublet.

Chapter Ten

If there was anything Sean hated, it was waiting. How difficult was it for a priest to announce his arrival? Was Gyllis having a bath? He continued pacing. *If John doesn't return by the count of ten, I shall go looking for him—or Gyllis, whomever I find first.*

When he reached nine, John stepped into the cloister, looking stern. "I'm sorry. Gyllis refuses to see you."

"What?" Sean spread his arms to his sides. "I will not leave until I gain an audience with her. At the very least, she must give me a chance to explain why I hastened to away from the fete last May. I'd agreed to sit on her plaid, but before the feast I received word of my father's death."

Opening his arms, John strode toward him. "Is that why she's so upset with you?"

"I can think of no other reason."

John grasped the cross hanging around his neck. "I do not believe __"

Sean pushed past him and marched ahead. "Where is she?"

John hastened to keep pace. "She is vulnerable."

"Do you not think I ken?" Sean barreled around the corner and opened the first door. "I'll find her if I must open every door in the priory."

John skirted in front of him. "Please. She needs more time—she's incredibly frail."

Sean again pushed past and flung open another door. "That is exactly why I must see her now." Sean slammed it, grinding his back molars. "Damn it all, tell me where she is."

John's gaze shifted along the corridor to a door at the far end. "Perhaps I could deliver a missive on your behalf."

Sean turned in the direction of John's stare. "There's no time for that." He strode directly to the door at the end.

"Please." The priest scuffled after him. "I have parchment and a quill in my quarters."

Sean ignored John's plea and yanked open the door.

Gyllis gasped, her eyes horrorstruck, she clapped a hand over her mouth. A monk had her skirts up around her thighs, his fingers clear up to her…

"Unhand her!"

Shoving her kirtle down, Gyllis scooted back.

Sean grabbed the lecherous monk by his collar and yanked him up. Before the man could raise his arms, Sean slammed his fist into the sniveling maggot's pasty face. With a high-pitched wail, the monk

toppled to the floor. Sean advanced.

"No!" Gyllis shrieked.

John darted between Sean and the monk, seizing Sean's shoulders. "Have you lost your mind?"

Enraged, Sean broke from John's grasp. "Did you not see him? He had her skirts hiked up so far I could see—"

"Miss Gyllis requires stimulating massage several times per day. I assure you, Brother Wesley has taken an oath of celibacy."

Sean glanced at the monk now sitting on the floor, rubbing his jaw.

"Are you all right, brother?" Gyllis asked.

The monk nodded. "Aye." He stood, giving Sean a wide berth.

"How could you barge into my chamber and accost a man of the cloth?" Gyllis moved slowly, but folded her arms, her face redder than a boiled lobster.

"Apologies, Miss Gyllis." Sean couldn't have made things any worse with his bravado, storming into her chamber like a jealous cur. "I did not think."

Gyllis pursed her lips—God, her face was still as lovely as sunrise. "No, you did not."

"Miss Gyllis, please," Sean pleaded. "Allow me a moment of your time, 'tis all I ask."

John grasped Sean's elbow and squeezed. "If I must resort to force to make you leave, I will."

If anyone in this God-forsaken priory could pose a challenge, it was John Campbell. He'd been a damned good knight before he became a priest, but Sean doubted he'd sparred much as of late. He steeled himself for a fight.

"I will hear him." Gyllis held up a trembling hand. "Leave us." She looked to John. "Brother Wesley will be standing directly outside the door should I require his assistance."

Sean tried not to grin.

The bumbling monk, bowed. "Very well, Miss Gyllis. We can keep the door ajar if you wish."

Gyllis met Sean's gaze and then looked down as if she were embarrassed. "That should not be necessary." The high color in her cheeks betrayed her unease.

"A quarter hour. 'Tis all I will allow—even for you," John said. "And the door shall remain ajar."

"My thanks." Sean ushered the two holy men out of the small cell and pushed the door until only a sliver of light shone through. When he turned to face Gyllis, he swallowed, completely at a loss for words. "Uh." He shifted his feet. God, her face was aglow with fury—and something pained. He guessed he'd hurt her deeply by not sending his regrets at Beltane.

She inclined her head toward the stool. “Will you sit? Looking up at you is making my neck sore.”

She obviously had no intention of making things easy for him. But moving toward the seat gave him a moment to gather his thoughts. He may as well start from where they’d left things in May. “Were you aware my father passed?”

Slowly, she covered her mouth with her dainty hand. “Oh my, I hadn’t heard. When?”

“Beltane. My kin were waiting with the news at the footrace finish line.”

Her delicate eyebrows drew together. “Your kin?”

“Aye, Jinny the healer and her husband, Angus.”

Her hand slid to her cheek. “The woman you embraced is married?”

Sean bit the corner of his lip and grimaced. “You saw that, too?”

“Aye.” Gyllis blushed scarlet. “After Alan slashed you with the blade, I hastened from the curtain wall to see if I could be of assistance.” She cringed. “When I found you in another woman’s arms…I…I…” She blinked in rapid succession. “And then you didn’t come to the feast nor did you send word.”

He reached out and held his hand steady for a moment, then took a chance and grasped her palm. Her fingers were cold. “I must ask your forgiveness. I was distraught with the news. Then things fell into mayhem and I was gallivanting around the countryside chasing after thieves and visiting crofters to ensure their loyalty.”

She stared at their interlaced fingers. “It sounds as if you’ve had a difficult time.”

Touching her calmed the thrumming beneath his skin. “Nowhere near as troublesome as things have been for you.”

Gyllis tugged her hand away and rubbed it, refusing to meet his gaze.

Sean’s fingers throbbed where her hand had been. He wanted to reclaim it and declare his undying love, but that would be nonsensical. If only he could pull her into his arms and make her well again. “I want to help you.”

She smirked. “What on earth do you think you can do that the monks have not already attempted?”

He didn’t have an answer. “What treatments have they tried?”

“Massage mostly, and tinctures that never seem to work.”

“But your hands have more dexterity than since I last saw you. What about your legs?”

She harrumphed. “No good whatsoever. I still cannot take a step without falling.”

“Can you stand?”

“For a moment.”

“’Tis a good sign.”

She looked up. “How do you ken?” The pain in her moss-green eyes was unmistakable.

Sean’s heart squeezed. He was no healer. “I just do. Besides, you promised me dancing lessons.”

“Please.” She covered her face with her hands, her long tresses dropping forward. “You are completely daft if you think I shall ever be able to dance again.”

“Pardon me for being so bold to think you will.” Sean scooted the bench away and kneeled before her. Again he grasped her hand and rubbed it between his warm palms. “Are your hands always this cold?”

“I suppose, aye.”

“Please allow me to warm them.” The corner of his mouth ticked up.

Using her shoulder, she shyly moved a lock of hair from her face. Though the gesture was innocent, it was unbelievably seductive. Had she not appeared so frail, he would have wrapped her in his arms and kissed her lips—ravished them as he’d done in the garden at Beltane.

Moistening his lips, he lifted her hand and kissed it. *Her scent’s more heavenly than a field of heather*. “If it would bring you a modicum of comfort, Miss Gyllis, it would be an honor to see you again.”

She held his gaze for a moment, her bottom lip slipping beneath her top teeth. “Please do not tease me.”

He drew his eyebrows together. “I would never do anything of the sort.”

“You are a chieftain now. You said yourself you’ve a great many affairs to attend. The last person you should concern yourself with is a silly cripple.”

A lump took up residence in his chest. “Do not say that. You are as beautiful today as you were at the festival.”

She tried to pull her hand away, but he held fast.

“I want to see you again. Will you please allow it?”

She drew in a sharp inhale and hesitated for a long moment. “Aye,” she whispered.

Sean could have picked her up and swung her in a circle. “Thank you.” Restraining his exuberance, he kissed her hand again rather than risk breaking her bones. “Now, would you like to show me how you stand?”

Cringing, she leaned away. “Oh no, it would cause too much embarrassment.”

That damned lump stretched over his heart again. “Why? Are you afraid I will laugh?”

“Nay.” She looked down.

He lifted her chin with the crook of his finger until her lovely green eyes met his. Ah yes, the irises were still circled with navy blue. He could lose himself in those eyes forever. “Then why?”

“I am afraid you will never come back.” Her voice trembled.

Without thought he slid his hands to her shoulders. “Ah, Miss Gyllis. Nothing could keep me away. Spending time with you is as natural as breathing.” He kissed the top of her head.

“Honestly?” She focused her gaze on his chest.

“Aye. I love you. Always have.” He heard the words bubble from his mouth before his mind realized what he’d said. Sean’s tongue went dry. He did love Gyllis. He’d just never admitted it to himself.

Before she looked up, she gasped.

When her gaze met his, her eyes were filled with life. They were as bright and clear as they’d been when he’d watched her dance at Beltane. “You’d best not be teasing a poor, crippled lass, Sir Sean MacDougall.”

Chapter Eleven

The following morning, Sean sat in his solar with Murdach and Angus, but he looked directly at the factor. “Please explain how five crowns went missing from your figures.”

Holding his palms out, Murdach appeared to be completely flummoxed. “Five crowns, m’laird? Are you certain?”

Sean snatched the ledger and slapped in down in front of the fool. “Aye I’m bloody certain. I lost a good amount of sleep over it as well.”

Murdach looked across the table at Angus. Blast it, Sean could have sworn the pair was in collusion.

He shoved back his chair and paced in front of the hearth. “Ballocks! You are two of my most trusted men.”

“We’ve done nothing to incite your ire, m’laird,” said Angus.

Sean whipped around and slapped his palms on the table. “No? Why are both of you sending silent messages across the table at one another?”

Angus sat back and shook his head. “We are doing no such thing.”

“Then where are my five crowns? How long has this been going on? Must I call in others to replace you?” He’d already decided to ask Angus to retire when Fraser returned. Murdach as well—the man could scarcely see past his nose.

“This was my fault. Do not blame Angus,” Murdach said. “I must have made a recording error. Please, if you must punish someone I am guilty as charged.”

Sean threw up his hands. “How long were you my father’s factor?”

“Near thirty years, m’laird.”

“And how old are you now?”

“Eight and fifty.”

Sean resumed his pacing, this time gripping his hands behind his back. “You provided satisfactory service to my father for thirty years?”

“Aye.”

“And how often did he catch your errors?”

“Rarely.” The man scratched his chin. “As a matter of fact, I do not believe he ever complained of errors or my loyalty.”

Most likely because he couldn’t read a damn thing you scrawled on a sheet of parchment. Sean waved a hand in front of Murdach’s face. “How is your eyesight?”

The factor grasped the lapels of his doublet, perspiration beading above his lip. “Not as good as it once was, but I still manage.”

Sean sat in his chair and groaned. “I have decided ’tis time for you to retire.”

“But sir—”

Sean held up a hand. “I’ve made my decision. You will receive a pension and continue to live out your days in the cottage with your missus.”

Murdach stared across the table at Angus, a frown pulling down his jowls. “As you wish, m’laird.”

Sean regarded his henchman who should be seeking retirement as well. However, with Fraser away, it was best to leave things with Angus alone for the time being.

A rap came at the door. “A missive from the Lord of Lorn, m’laird.”

Sean eyed the two men. “I’ll return momentarily.” He crossed the floor and opened the door. Stepping into the passageway, he accepted the note. “Thank you,” he said rather loudly. “Come with me whilst I fetch that for him.”

The messenger looked puzzled, but Sean grasped him by the elbow and inclined his head toward the man’s ear. “This way.”

He clomped his feet on the floorboards, making a show of walking toward the stairwell, then released the messenger’s arm and whispered, “Go to the kitchens and get something to eat. I shall prepare Lorn a reply anon.”

“Very well, sir.”

Sean quietly returned to the solar and stood outside the door. He opened the missive from Lorn. King James had given consent and the wedding was still on track for autumn—fortunately news which didn’t require Sean’s immediate attention.

“You should tell him,” Angus’s deep voice rumbled through the wall.

“But that is not what Alan declared.”

Sean held his breath. *Alan*?

“I cannot renege on his final request,” Murdach continued.

Sean released a whoosh of air. At first he’d thought they were referring to MacCoul, but his father’s name had been Alan as well. He leaned closer to the door.

“Aye, but he cannot run his affairs from the grave,” Angus argued.

“If he’d set aside a provision, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“Well, if ’tis a case between proving my loyalty and support for the living and honor for the dead, I’ll choose the living. Sir Sean deserves our fealty now.”

“You are right as always, Angus.”

“Then we’re agreed. Regardless of what the chieftain requested from his deathbed, it stops today.”

“Aye.”

Sean leaned against the wall. He could hang them both for what he’d just heard. But then they had been acting upon a promise to his father—something Da wanted to keep hidden. Whatever it was, they

had called an end to it. Content that the men within his chamber were not trying to swindle him, he opened the door and stepped inside.

Angus and Murdach looked up expectantly. What Sean had earlier interpreted as collusion now looked like faces torn. He hoped to God his hunch was right.

He grinned and strode to the sideboard. “I believe we should toast to Murdach’s retirement.”

Gyllis studied Brother Wesley while he circled his knuckles into her calf. “Have you taken a vow of silence in the past few days?”

He looked at her with pinched brows and shook his head.

“You’ve scarcely said a word since Sir Sean was here.”

“Have I not?” He set her leg down and started on the other.

Gyllis cringed. Had she been insensitive? After all, Sean did give him a good wallop. “How is your jaw?”

He opened his mouth and stretched it to the side. “’Tis coming good.”

“I am sorry he hit you.”

Brother Wesley grumbled, “As am I.”

“Honestly, Sir Sean MacDougall is a nice man. He never would have struck out if he hadn’t thought I was in danger.”

“It might save him some trouble if he learned to ask questions before he started swinging his fists.”

Gyllis smoothed her hands over her kirtle. “You abhor violence, do you not?”

“Aye, ’tis why I joined the order.”

“I shall ask Sir Sean to apologize as soon as he returns.”

“*If* he comes again.” Wesley stopped rubbing. “Besides, there is no need. As you said, he thought he was protecting you.”

When Gyllis looked into the monk’s troubled eyes, she could tell the topic of Sir Sean did not sit well with him. “You should forgive him.”

“I have. ’Tis a vice to hold a grudge.”

Gyllis folded her hands. “But I sense you do not care to talk about him.”

“’Tis because he likes you.”

She laughed. Sean *loved* her, and thinking about it had tickled her insides with joy for the past few days. Though she wasn’t about to lose her head over it. She had no doubt he loved her as a fostered sister—but still it was enough to make her heart soar. “Is that such a bad thing?”

Wesley grew quiet again. He pulled down her skirts and patted her knee. “I should prepare for vespers.”

“But I haven’t practiced walking yet today.”

“Perhaps we can do that on the morrow.” He stood and bowed. “If you will excuse me.”

Gyllis watched the monk take his leave. It didn’t take a seer to discern something bothered him and she had no doubt it had everything to do with Sir Sean. She couldn’t understand Brother Wesley’s recalcitrance. Since the young chieftain’s visit, she’d actually been happy. She’d also made marked progress. Presently she could stand on her own without wobbling and, if she leaned on Brother Wesley’s hands, she could take a step.

Gyllis was so close to being able to walk, she was anxious to keep practicing. She flexed her feet, yet another thing she’d recently been able to accomplish. She leaned forward and placed her hands on the stool. Perhaps if she supported herself on it, she could practice walking around it and wouldn’t fall. If she wasn’t careful, she could end up on the floor in her chamber alone for hours.

She placed her feet flush with the floor and took her weight on her hands. Once sure she was balanced, she sidestepped. She closed her eyes and pretended she was dancing. *Step together, step together around the stool.*

After she’d made two circles, she grew more confident. With an inhale, she released her grip and straightened. Her knees quivered a bit. She held out her hands to gain balance and stood still for a moment. She sidestepped just as she’d done when holding onto the stool. Drawing her feet together, she decided she could do it again. Taking the smallest of steps, Gyllis managed to make it completely around the stool without falling. She clapped her hands and squealed with delight.

Excited to do more, she boldly stepped away from the stool. Her knee buckled. With her heart flying to her throat, Gyllis flung her hands forward to break her fall. Collapsed in a heap on the floor, she waited for the pain to come. When it didn’t, she moved her arms and rolled to her bottom. She straightened her right leg, then the left. She chuckled—thank heavens she wasn’t hurt in the slightest.

But the best thing? She had actually shuffled her feet around the stool without help.

Gyllis threw back her head and laughed out loud. Her skin tingled, her belly muscles tightened and she laughed some more. Heavens, it was good to laugh for a change. She’d done so much crying since she’d arrived, Gyllis never thought she’d find the will to laugh again.

She covered her mouth with a gasp when the door swung open.

Before she could blink, Sean dashed inside and scooped her into his arms. “My God, Miss Gyllis. Are you hurt?”

She sucked in a few stuttered breaths. “I-I am quite well. Just had a wee tumble.” After he set her on the bed, she grinned broadly. “I

took my first unassisted steps today. The only problem is no one was here to see me."

"Wonderful news…but you shouldn't have been so bold without someone to assist you."

She jutted out her bottom lip. "Please, since I arrived a monk has had to help me with every bodily purpose imaginable. I stepped around the stool on my own."

"That is exciting to hear." He sat beside her and clasped her hand. "'Tis quite an impressive feat. You shall soon be dancing."

The touch of his rugged fingers made her blood rush hot beneath her skin. "I imagined myself dancing around the stool." Gyllis couldn't stop smiling.

Sean smiled back. Bless it, he was handsome. His eyes sparkled with the ray of light beaming from the window. He'd combed his dark locks away from his face and his chin was shaved clean. Gyllis brushed her fingers along it.

His eyes grew dark, intense. He moistened his lips with a slow lap of his tongue. "I shaved close this morn."

She looked closer—not a hint of dark stubble. "I do not believe I can remember ever seeing your chin so smooth." *Or your lips so kissable*. Sean's upper lip was slightly fuller than his lower. But together they reminded her of a ship with two sails—a very sensuous ship that perhaps might take them away to a place where paralysis did not exist.

He grinned—a lazy grin that made her desire a wee kiss all the more. "I took extra care with the sharpening leather."

Raising her chin, she pursed her lips.

But rather than kiss her, Sean stood and paraded in a grand circle, his arm stretching out before him. Finishing the turn he bowed deeply. "May I have this dance?"

She covered her mouth and giggled. "I said I scooted around a stool, silly."

He straightened and stepped closer. "In my arms you shall not falter, m'lady."

Gyllis blinked. "You mean to—"

Before she could finish, he swept her into his embrace and swung her in a circle. Sean's melodic voice hummed a bard's ballad as he swayed. Gyllis latched her arms around his neck and held as tightly as she could. *Mm*. He smelled of cedar and spice.

After her initial shock, Gyllis relaxed into him, closed her eyes and smiled. The way her body pressed against his was scandalous, but who would know? His powerful arms supporting her made her bubble inside.

She laughed and laughed while he swayed and twirled her in

circles until her head swooned. “My, I’m dizzy.”

He stopped turning when they reached the wall. “Then we must promenade.” He hummed a slower tune and when he stepped forward, his thigh moved hers back. A tingling sensation swirled up her leg and intensified in her nether parts. How she wished she could wrap her legs around his body and cling to him throughout eternity.

Stopping in the center of the room, he stood still, gazing down at her face. His expression had grown serious, hungry.

“Why did you stop?” Gyllis whispered, breathless.

“I-I do not remember the rest of the tune.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you have a beautiful singing voice?”

Sean didn’t say a word, the look of hunger intensified in his eyes. He lowered his lashes and shifted his gaze to her lips. Gyllis’s heart thundered so forcefully, she was sure it was pummeling Sean’s chest right through her bodice. Ever so slowly he inclined his head.

Please, kiss me now.

Gyllis lifted her chin and met him halfway. His lips parted with a quick inhale of air. Blinking, his gaze dipped to her mouth. Her entire body came alive with swirling want. With one more quick lick of his lips, he covered her mouth with bone-melting fervor. The intensity and passion behind his kiss sent her mind whirling in a cyclone of rapture. She closed her eyes and melted into him. Aye, kissing at the Beltane festival had been amazing, but now Sean ravished her mouth with unexpected hunger. Together with his woodsy scent, Gyllis’s entire body ignited with fire. She returned his smoldering kiss with vigor. Thank the heavens her tongue had not been affected by paralysis.

When he paused, he drew in a ragged breath. “Forgive me. I must not take advantage.”

The door swung open. “What, in the name of all that is holy, are you doing with my sister in your arms?”

Holding her tight, Sean spun around and faced the prior. “John.” His voice cracked. “’Tis good to see you.”

John hastened inside and shut the door. “I wish I could say the same.”

“We were dancing,” Gyllis explained.

Sean assisted her to ease onto the bed. “Apologies. I took liberties.”

John scowled. “I ought to—”

Gyllis held up her palms. “We must have been overcome. I walked all by myself today, a-and Sir Sean and I danced to celebrate my success.”

John glared at Sean. “You danced?”

Sean nodded. “Aye.”

“He supported me in his arms was all.” *And he kissed me*. She brushed her fingers across her lips. *The most wonderful kiss imaginable*.

John shifted his glare to Gyllis. “What would Duncan and Ma say if they knew Sean MacDougall had been unchaperoned in this cell with you in his arms?”

Gyllis sat erect and raised her chin. “Pardon me, but there’s no need to tell them anything except that I’m making progress.”

Sean folded his arms. “John is right, ’tis not proper for me to attend you in your cell. Upon my next visit we should converse in the gardens.”

Gyllis clapped a hand over her heart. *Sean is coming back!* “I hope you will return soon.”

He smiled, the warmth of his grin making her heart flutter all the more. “Things at Dunollie require my attention, but I plan to visit two days hence.”

John opened the door. “I shall see you out.”

“Very well.” Sean grasped Gyllis’s hand and pressed pillow-soft lips against it. “I’ll see you soon.”

“And I will await your return with rapt anticipation, Sir Sean.”

Gyllis watched him until the door closed. With a loud sigh, she clapped her hands to her chest. Perhaps God *had* intended for her to contract paralysis.

Chapter Twelve

In the following week, Sean visited Gyllis every morning. Riding his horse at a fast trot, he easily traversed the six miles to Ardchattan Priory in under an hour. Today he was especially excited to see the bonny lass because he had something to give her.

When he arrived, Gyllis was in the courtyard working with Brother Wesley. Seated on the bench, the monk held her hands and helped her stand. When he nodded, she sat.

Deep down, Sean was glad he'd hit the monk the first time he'd seen him. Brother Wesley may have taken an oath of celibacy, but he was a man all the same. He was completely unable to hide his adoration for Gyllis, and the piss-swilling swine fed his lust by having his hands all over her limbs throughout each day. John considered it improper for Sean to be alone with Gyllis? He should take a look at his own men and deem the same.

"Sir Sean, I am surprised to see you this day." Gyllis beamed radiantly as always.

Sean shifted his angry stare from Brother Wesley and smiled at Gyllis. He held up the crutches in his hand. "I commissioned the carpenter to fashion these for you. When I arrived home yesterday, they were awaiting me." He placed them under his arm, took her hand and kissed it. "I could not wait until the morrow to see you use them."

She blessed him with a delightfully dimpled grin. "How so very kind of you."

Brother Wesley cleared his throat. "I was planning to make you a pair myself." He eyed her and held up his finger. "When you are ready, Miss Gyllis."

Sean arched an eyebrow at the errant monk. "I believe the lass is ready now."

"I think not." Wesley shook his head, black curls jostling. "'Tis still too soon."

"And what makes you an expert on the matter?" Sean tapped his foot.

The little monk managed to draw upon enough cods to puff out his chest. "I'll tell you, Miss Gyllis is the second patient with paralysis I've tended, and—"

"Enough." Gyllis reached out for the crutches. "I want to try them."

Sean shouldered past the monk and held the pegs out to her.

The sext bell rang.

"You'd best go pray," Sean said over his shoulder.

Brother Wesley pressed his palms together. "If she falls, it will be

on your conscience."

"That it will." Sean returned his attention to Gyllis and grinned. "Are you ready?"

"Aye." She batted her eyelashes. "But you weren't very nice to Brother Wesley."

"Nay? Well, how would you like it if a nun had her hands all over me day and night?"

"Oh, please. 'Tis not like that."

"You think not? I ken a lustful man when I see one."

Gyllis glanced back toward the church. "Honestly?"

"Aye." Sean balanced the crutches. "Come, grasp the posts and see if you can pull yourself up."

She bit her bottom lip and looked at the crutches like she was about to mount an untrained horse. Wrapping her fingers around them, she launched her body forward and up. Sean's arms quivered a tad while he held the pegs steady.

Once Gyllis had gained her balance, he nodded to the armrests. "Now slide them under your arms."

When they were properly in place, she blew out a breath.

"How do they feel?" he asked.

"Good."

He gestured forward. "Well then, give it a try."

The look on her face reminded him of a young lad concentrating on firing a bow and arrow for the first time, but she moved the crutches forward and shuffled up to them. Then she chuckled, a rapt grin spreading across her face. Sean stepped back to encourage her to do more.

In no time, she had moved a quarter of the way across the courtyard.

He hastened beside her. "You're doing well."

"Thank you."

"Do you think you'll be able to use these to gain a modicum of freedom?"

"Aye." She took in a deep breath. "But I've grown tired so quickly."

Sean pointed to the bench. "Can you make it back?"

She nodded and awkwardly crisscrossed the crutches until she had herself turned around. Sean resisted his urge to help, but he followed her with his hands out, ready to catch her at any moment. When Gyllis arrived at the bench, he placed his arm around her waist to give support and helped her sit. He leaned in and inhaled the scent of heaven and heather. He squeezed his arm a little tighter, savoring her supple hip as it molded against his.

"Goodness," she chuckled.

Pushing away his lustful urges, he sat beside her and crossed his

legs. “I think you did quite well for your first try.”

She rubbed under her arms. “It might take me a while to get used to them.”

“Did they cause you pain?”

“A wee bit under my arms.”

He held up a crutch and examined the wooden armrest. “I’d bet we could sew some sheep’s wool around these and make them a mite more comfortable.”

She ran her hand over the hickory. “No need to bother. The carpenter has done a fine job of sanding them smooth.”

“I like to bother—and nothing gives me more pleasure than watching you battle to overcome your illness. I’ll take these with me and they’ll have a cushion of wool when I next return.”

A blush blossomed across her cheeks. “My thanks. You are ever so kind.”

Sean ran his finger over her skin. “Rose petals.” He used the crook of his finger to turn her head to face him. “The problem with the priory is there is no privacy.”

She inhaled a stuttered breath. “I think ’tis designed that way.”

After placing his hands on her shoulders, he glanced left, right and then focused on her lips. “Presently they’re all praying.” His voice trailed off.

Her pink tongue snuck out and moistened her lips. “How fortuitous.” As she pronounced the words, her lips reminded him of rosebuds, better yet, she smelled more heavenly than a basin filled with petals.

Inclining his head, he could no sooner resist those roses than he could stop breathing. She raised her chin, enticing him further—begging him to steal a wee kiss. So fierce the memory of her passion when he last kissed her, his blood thrummed with fire. Closing the distance, he first plied her mouth gently, slipping his tongue inside and tasting her sweetness. Her fingers slid around his neck and drew him ever closer. Then her gentle moan rumbled through his body. Hot and raw, he could never totally control himself when within Gyllis’s arms.

Exploring the silky smooth recesses of her mouth, his entire body craved her, could have devoured her. He cared not if they were on holy ground. The desire flooding his senses was nothing if not sacred. He clutched his arms around her, afraid to let go. God, he wanted to hold her forever—protect her from all the evils of the world.

Heaven help him, he could have lost Gyllis without even being aware of her illness. It was only by a stroke of luck when Lorn had asked him to meet at Ardchattan Priory. Never again did he want to see her sick and in pain. He would do anything to keep the lass safe

for the rest of their days.

She pulled back and stared into his eyes. Oh, how Gyllis could control him with her sultry stare, especially when her lips were rouged from a passionate kiss. “What will happen…?” She looked away.

He circled his hand on her back. “Is something weighing on you, lass?”

She shook her head. “I cannot say it.”

“Please. How can I know what is troubling you until you speak your mind?”

She bit her bottom lip and exhaled. “What will happen when I return to Kilchurn Castle?” She placed her hand over his heart. “What will happen to us?”

“Nothing will change—but that day is far off.”

“I am not so certain. John thinks I’ll be able to return home soon, especially if Mother puts my bed in the first floor solar.”

Sean didn’t care for that idea. She’d be further away from Dunollie and then he would have Duncan’s ire to contend with. “I shall speak to John about insuring you’re fully capable of climbing stairs. The solar? ’Tis no place for a highborn lass to sleep. And after dark there are drunken guardsmen everywhere below stairs.”

The doors to the chapel creaked open and the resounding chant from the processing monks filled the courtyard. Sean slid his hands to Gyllis’s shoulders. Closing his eyes, he inhaled her sweet scent once more while placing a tender kiss upon her forehead.

Sean left the priory later than he’d intended, something which was becoming a habit. Too many things demanded his attention at Dunollie, yet he continually found excuses to visit Gyllis.

He’d ridden about halfway to the castle when prickles at the back of his neck told him he wasn’t alone. Over the years Sean had developed an uncanny sense, one respected and valued by Duncan and the Highland Enforcers. He’d tracked and eluded many men in his past. Easing off on the reins, he cocked his head and listened. Damn, they were close—riding through the trees off to the right. He palmed his dirk while glancing over his shoulder. A flicker of metal caught the sunlight.

Too close. My senses must be addled.

Sean dug in his heels, spurring his warhorse into a gallop. From the pummeling of the earth behind, at least four outlaws made chase. He pulled on the reins slightly—just enough to give the leader a chance to gain some ground.

Peering over his shoulder, the blackguard wore a great helm covering his entire head, as did the bastard behind him.

Too cowardly to show their faces.

Sean listened and from the corner of his eye, he watched as he allowed the leader to approach. As the man reached Sean's shoulder, the Chieftain of Dunollie threw a backhand with his dirk. Grunting, the outlaw shirked from the blade and swung a mace. Sean jerked aside, but not far enough. The spike on the iron ball caught Sean's upper arm, knocking him aside. He squeezed his legs around his horse's barrel, latched his fingers under his pommel and pulled himself up. His arm throbbed, but he had no time to think of pain.

Still holding the knife, he countered with an undercut and knocked the helm from the scoundrel's head. The man gaped, blood running down his cheek where the dirk had slashed.

Sean recognized the face and his gut squeezed.

Hoof beats thundered. The others had gained ground. Sean dug in his heels with a bellow. Faster than a Highland wildcat, his stallion launched into a thundering gallop. Relentless, Sean urged his horse faster while the beast took in steady snorts of air through enormous nostrils. When they cleared the forest, Sean glanced behind. The brigands had dropped speed—smart enough to know if they chased him all the way to Dunollie, they'd be dead men for certain.

Haste, you bastards.

He slowed his horse to a canter as the castle loomed on the horizon. He'd seen the outlaw before, and by the shocked expression when he exposed the brigand's face, Sean had no doubt the man knew who he was—perhaps even feared him. Sean rifled through his memory—yes, he'd seen that ugly face at Beltane. He was one of the bastards who'd attacked him during the footrace. The man wasn't a MacDougall and Sean hadn't recalled seeing him in Lorn's retinue a few sennights past. Was the ugly boar a Campbell? He didn't want to come to conclusions, but needed to find out what the hell was afoot. Were these petty thieves, or was something more sinister stirring?

Clomping across the wooden bridge, he raced his mount through the barbican gates and rode straight to the keep.

Angus met him with a groom on his heels. "What the devil, m'laird? You rode in here like you were being chased by Satan."

Sean dismounted and glared at him. "Perhaps I was."

Angus gaped at the blood dripping from Sean's sleeve. "Lord Almighty, what happened to your arm?"

Sean handed the reins to the groom. "A sniveling maggot and his helmed accomplices thought they'd bludgeon me with a mace."

Angus examined Sean's arm, his shirt thick with blood. "I'll bring Jinny up to you at once."

"Nay. First send out the guard to track the bastards—they attacked two miles from here on the path to Ardchattan Priory."

“Ardchattan? Is that where you’ve been off to?”

“Bloody hell, you’re worse than an old woman.” Sean dismissed him with a flick of his wrist. “Send the men after them before the trail grows cold.”

Once inside his chamber, Sean strode directly to the table and poured himself a cup of whisky. He tossed back a gulp and waited until the fire flowed down his gullet and pooled in his empty stomach. It took only a moment for the calming spirit to spread through his blood. He yanked his shirt off and examined the gash in his arm. The cut was jagged and a purple bruise swelled around it.

I’ll send every last one of them to hell.

As master of Dunollie lands, it was Sean’s responsibility to ensure the safety of his clan—a responsibility that had taken second place as of late—a folly. He’d been spending too much time doting over Gyllis. Worse, every time he went to the priory, he ended up staying far longer than he planned. He was a chieftain, damn it all.

He took another sip of whisky and winced. By God, he needed to stop acting like a lovesick fool. Aye, he’d win Gyllis’s hand in time, but he could no longer shirk his duties. He crossed to the ewer and bowl and poured in water. Splashing water over the gash, he hissed at the stinging burn.

I must limit my visits to Ardchattan to Sundays and Wednesdays. He reached for a drying cloth and clamped it over his arm. He hated the thought of waiting to see her. At least today was Friday. He need only make it through tomorrow and he could again be with the lassie. *If only I could meet with her alone*.

“M’laird?” A rap came at the door.

“Come.”

Jinny bustled into the chamber with Angus on her heels. “I came as soon as I received word.” She set her basket on the table and gestured to a chair. “You’d best sit and let me have a look.”

Sean frowned at Angus. “Is the guard away?”

“Yes, m’laird.”

“Why are you not with them?”

“I felt it best to bring Jinny up here to tend your wound.” He peered around for a look. “Good Lord, we must bandage that straight away.”

“Aye.” Jinny placed her fingers on either side of the cut and cringed. “’Tis a nasty gash. We’d best put some leeches on it while you’re still bleeding. Then I’ll have to sew you up.”

Sean took another draw on his whisky. “Do what you must. I’ve no time to be waylaid by a wound of the flesh.”

Angus grumbled under his breath. “Do you ken who attacked?”

“Nay. They wore bucket helms. I managed to knock one off—

thought I recognized the brigand from the fete—one of the snakes who attacked me during the footrace."

The man-at-arms combed his fingers through his unruly grey hair. "You mustn't keep leaving without a guard. 'Tis dangerous for any man, especially a man of property such as yourself."

Sean didn't care to be lectured by someone who'd been withholding secrets. "And whom do you think attacked me?"

"I've no idea, m'laird."

"Nay? For all I know you had a hand in it."

Jinny stopped with a leech held in her fingers. "Angus would never do anything—"

"What are you saying?" Angus held up his hand to stifle Jinny's rebuttal. "Are you accusing me?"

"I heard you talking to Murdach in my solar. I ken there was no error when *my* coin went missing." Sean batted Jinny's hand away. "I ken an ugly deception has taken root under my own roof."

Angus stammered and spread his palms.

Sean stood. "Tell me I am wrong."

The older man hung his head. "I made a promise to your father I would never reveal his secret."

Sean smashed the cup of whisky and sent it flying into the hearth. "Bloody secrets!" he bellowed. "Are they what nearly got me killed?"

"N-no, m'laird."

Sean drew his dirk. "My father had secrets that he could not relay to me, his only son?"

Angus pulled down his collar and offered his throat. "I made a promise to a dying man." His Adam's apple bobbed. "His son has my fealty and I will gladly lay down my life for him, but I will not renege upon his father's wishes."

"Merciful Lord." Jinny crossed herself while her voice trembled. "Please, m'laird."

Sean watched the blue vein in Angus's neck pulse. If he sliced his blade across it, the henchman would bleed out before his face hit the floor. "I will tolerate no backstabbing in my clan."

"Nor will I, m'laird."

Jinny tugged on Sean's arm. "Please sit. You've had a terrible ordeal."

"Quiet, woman." Sean narrowed his eyes at Angus. "Because my father requested your silence upon his death bed, I shall make this one allowance. But moving forward, there must be no secrets between us. If I discover one more deception, you will be hanged, make no bones about it."

Angus released his collar and bowed his head. "Yes, m'laird."

Glancing between the two, Sean frowned and took his seat.

Without a word, Jinny applied the leeches while Angus stood at attention. Sean studied the man he'd known all his life. As before, he didn't believe him a traitor, but something wasn't right. By God, he would tolerate no deception within the clan. Sooner or later, someone would make a mistake. That's when Sean would attack and heaven help anyone caught. They would not be long for this world.

Unrest twisted in his gut. He would not sit idle while the Dunollie guard chased his attackers. "Make haste, woman. Angus and I shall follow the guard at once."

Chapter Thirteen

Gyllis was a tad disappointed when Sean didn't pay a visit the next day. Brother Wesley had kindly propped her up on the pillows for the afternoon, where she leafed through John's Bible. After having read her storybook a dozen times, she relented and gave in to her brother's urging to read something to enrich her soul.

She looked up when her door opened, her stomach fluttering in hopes that it would be Sean, but Helen's radiant smile brightened the cell. Gyllis put down her book and opened her arms. "Praise the heavens. I'd thought you'd forgotten me."

Helen wrapped her in a warm embrace. "Not at all. Have you not received the missives we wrote?"

"Aye, I have, but 'tis not like seeing you."

"I ken." Helen sat on the stool beside the bed. "Unfortunately there aren't any inns nearby, or I'd spend an entire sennight with you."

Gyllis adjusted her shoulders so she wouldn't have to twist her neck. "How long will you be able to stay?"

"Just the afternoon and Mother sent an entire army to escort me across Loch Etive and home again."

Gyllis laughed. "At least you are in the company of a retinue of brawny knights."

Helen twisted a lock of her dun hair around her finger—the color always reminded Gyllis of honey. "I suppose so." She lowered her gaze along with her frown.

"Whatever is wrong?" Gyllis hadn't seen that woeful visage on her sister's face often.

"Nothing, really." Helen smiled. "'Tis just Ma didn't send any noble knights along—just the same old dreary guards from Kilchurn Castle."

Gyllis laughed. "You mean Sir Eoin MacGregor isn't with you?"

She unwound her hair. "Afraid not."

"Why, how utterly heartless of him."

Helen sighed. "Honestly, I haven't seen Sir Eoin in some time."

"Where has he been?"

"How should I know? No one tells us lassies anything."

"Some things do not change." Gyllis chuckled and placed her hand atop Helen's. "My, 'tis good to see you."

Helen smiled, but it wasn't her usual sweet grin. It was guarded. "And how are you, my dearest?"

Gyllis bit her lip. Though she and Helen could always tell each other their deepest secrets, a tickle at the back of her mind told her not to talk about Sir Sean. Things were only beginning to blossom between them and, presently, she didn't know if his attentions were

because they had been dear friends and he felt sorry for her. Yes, she'd sensed his genuine fondness and delightful kisses, but things were so different now. She had an illness that very well could leave her a cripple for life. No man would ever want to marry a cripple. No. She would keep her meetings with Sir Sean to herself. She'd lock away any happiness that he imparted and, for the first time in her life, would refrain from thinking about the future.

She ventured to look at her legs, covered by a blanket. "I've gained a bit of use of my hands, but my legs are generally worthless."

"That is awful." Helen folded her hands in her lap. "Do you think the monk's treatments are helping?"

"Gradually—but not fast enough for me." Gyllis clapped. "I would prefer not to talk about me. How are things at home? Mother?"

"Mother is worried half to death about you, but recently she's been busy running the keep. Duncan took Lady Meg to Edinburgh to spend midsummer at court with King James. It seems the king always requires something from our brother."

"Aye, and his wife could no longer bear for them to be separated, I'm sure."

"I'd agree. Being apart makes it rather difficult for them to produce…ah…more bairns."

Gyllis burst out with laughter and cupped her hand over her mouth. "You do surprise me at times, Helen."

"Well, 'tis the truth." She smiled—now a warm, genuine smile. Gyllis realized all her sisters were rather pretty—funny she hadn't thought much about it before. "Alice and Marion are the same, still at that age where they're driving Mother mad with their silly remarks and back talking."

"Aye, I remember when we were ten and six." Gyllis chuckled. "We were hellions."

"We were for certain. God bless Ma, she lived through it." Helen glanced to the corner where John had rested the lute sennights ago. "Have you been playing?"

Gyllis held up her hands. "I'm afraid my fingers have not yet found the dexterity they once had."

"Perhaps it would be soothing if I played for you?" Helen's eyebrows raised, as if asking for permission.

"Please do."

Easing into the pillows, Gyllis closed her eyes and listened to Helen's magical fingers. Of all her sisters, Helen was definitely the most talented with the lute. She plucked the strings with such lithe grace, the music came alive. And when she sang, it was as if larks had joined together in a heavenly chorus. The music moved Gyllis, sent tingles up her spine. She had missed Helen's company, though she

wasn't yet ready to return home. Besides being an invalid, she'd rarely see Sir Sean if she went back to Kilchurn Castle.

Mid-strum, John entered with Mevan, Kilchurn Castle's man-at-arms. Helen rested the lute on the bed and greeted John with a warm embrace. After they'd exchanged pleasantries, John gestured to the guard. "'Tis time to away home. I've arranged for your transport to ferry you across Loch Etive giving Fearnoch Forest a wide berth."

"Has something happened in the forest?" Gyllis asked.

John gave her a stern look as if she hadn't the right to ask her question. The intensity in his eyes made her shoulders rigid. Something had happened for certain.

Helen bent down and embraced her. "Next time I'll see if we can stay longer."

Gyllis kept her eyes on John. "I'd like that." She held her tongue until Helen's footsteps echoed down the passageway. Thank heavens John didn't leave her to fret alone in her cell. "Tell me what happened."

"We received word of an outlaw attack in the forest."

He was going to force her to draw it out of him, but she had to ask. The gooseflesh rising on her skin was warning enough. "Is Sir Sean all right?" Gyllis nearly choked on the words.

John let out a long breath. "He escaped with only minor injuries. The crier stopped by to warn us of the danger. Dunollie men are after the culprits now. If I ken Sir Sean MacDougall, they will be brought to justice before this week is through." John pulled the latch.

"But—" Before she could finish, John closed the door. Gyllis stared for a moment, hating her damned legs. What on earth could she do to help? Balling her fists, she pounded her useless thighs. There she sat, incarcerated within the walls of a priory while Sean rode into unimaginable danger.

She smoothed her hand over the Bible in her lap and closed her eyes, offering a silent prayer for his well-being. What did John mean by *minor* injuries? And when would she see Sir Sean again? *Please, dear God, watch over your servant Sean MacDougall, and lead him home to safety*.

Sean wasn't one to let a few stitches and a bruised arm set him back. Besides, spending a night tracking was what he needed to cement his priorities. He'd not taken the cattle thieving seriously enough and the brigands had the gall to attack *him*. It was the slap in the face he needed.

With the dawn, Sean and Angus lay on their bellies, staring down at the outlaw's camp.

"Only four," Angus said.

“If I’d just attacked the Chieftain of Dunollie, I’d be a bit less conspicuous,” Sean growled.

Obviously they didn’t expect retaliation. The bastards were sloppy. Nestled within a glen, their morning fire was like a beacon flickering through the light mist. For the past half mile, Sean could practically smell the roasting meat. The MacDougalls had them surrounded. All Sean needed do was give the signal. But he was more cautious than that. Were they stupid or were they luring Sean and his men into a trap?

Only four men. Regardless, they do not stand a chance.

Sean slid back and mounted his horse. Drawing his sword, he gave the signal by holding it straight up above his head. Bellows erupted from the men charging down the hillside. The bastards barely had time to draw their weapons and face the onslaught. Fifty to four were unbeatable odds.

Sean called a halt before the fighting began. “Throw down now.”

The leader faced him. “Throw down so you can run us through? I’d rather you gave me a fighting chance.”

Once again, he recognized the man’s face—aye, he was sure of it now. This was the same man who’d attacked him during the footrace. “I’d be running you through this day regardless.” Sean dismounted and Angus followed suit, sword at the ready.

The man’s gaze darted to the right. Sean followed that gaze, straight to a MacDougall guard—Gawen was his name. Sean gave the guard a stern stare to let him know he’d not missed the interchange, then he focused on his prisoner. “Why did you attack me in the forest?”

The scoundrel spread his palms and smirked. “I see a man with a horse as finely outfitted as yours and I ken he has some coin in his purse.”

The smug look on the bastard’s face made Sean’s blood boil. He closed his fist. With a roar, he slammed it across the animal’s face. The man careened to his arse, blood streaming from the corner of his mouth. He swiped an arm across his lips and eyed Sean. With a bellow, he jumped up, brandishing his sword. Sean skittered aside and disarmed him. The laggard was no match for Sean’s years of training. The other mongrels dropped their weapons. A mangy lot of mutts they were. Sean yanked the bastard’s arm and spun him into a hold with his sword leveled against his neck.

“I’ll be paid my due respect the next time you address me,” Sean growled. “I’ve seen you afore. Now tell me why you attacked me during the footrace at Dunstaffnage.”

The man spat blood, squirming in a futile attempt to break free. “Don’t kill me.”

“I need to know. Why?”

“He paid us a crown.”

Sean pushed the blade until it drew blood. “Who?”

“Jesus Christ.” The man’s fear stank like a steaming pile of cow dung. “I don’t ken his name. Black hair—an ugly bastard—wore leather breeks.”

Sean nodded to Angus. “Tie them up. We’ll take them back to Dunollie and hang the lot at dawn on the morrow. Give them a chance to atone to the maker for all their evil deeds.”

“Please, m’laird, have mercy on a poor beggar,” the miserable leader whined.

Sean threw him to the ground. “Would you have been merciful had your mace knocked me from my mount last eve?” A guard wrapped a rope around the man’s wrists and Sean sheathed his weapon. “I think not.”

By the time the Dunollie guard arrived at the castle, the sun had set. As a warrior, Sean had gone days without sleep before, but his limbs were heavy with exhaustion. His shoulder throbbed—hurt like the devil. “Take the prisoners to the dungeon,” he bellowed, then he pulled Angus aside. “Do not allow Gawen anywhere near the prisoners. If he tries to visit the dungeon, throw him inside and he’ll hang with the others.”

“Gawen, m’laird?”

“You heard me.”

Pushing into the keep, he yelled louder, “Jinny, I need your salve and a flagon of whisky in my chamber. Now.”

He loosened his sword belt as he climbed the stairs. When in God’s name had he aged? He strode into his chamber and tossed his weapons on the bed. Life had been a mite easier before he’d become a chieftain. Chasing a mob of thieves provided good sport, but digging into the Dunollie coffers and acting the part of lord-high executioner soured his stomach.

Jinny dashed in with her basket. “Do not tell me you’ve torn your stitches, m’laird.”

“What would you do if I had?” He pulled off his doublet and shirt and sat in the chair in front of the hearth.

She set her basket on the table and crossed her arms. “Don’t you be patronizing me, m’laird. You may be lord of this keep, but ’tis my duty to see you do not succumb to the fever or worse.”

Groaning, Sean leaned back. “’Tis but a scratch, woman.”

“Aye? You should have let my Angus track down the brigands. Look at you, you’ve purple bags under your eyes,” she hissed. “Goodness, oh my goodness. Your shoulder is a sight.”

Sean glanced down at the swollen mass of purple flesh. “Quit your bellyaching and slap some salve on it—you ken, the concoction that eases the pain.”

She fished in her basket and pulled out a pot. “You need to rest your blessed shoulder.” She leaned forward and sniffed. “At least it is not putrid—yet.”

“Did you bring up the whisky?”

“Aye.” She swabbed on a glop of smelly goo.

“Well, are you planning to keep it to yourself? A man could die of thirst whilst you dawdle.”

She reached into her basket and pulled out a flagon. “Here, since you cannot wait.”

“You’re a good matron. A swipe of your ointment and a few strong tots of MacDougall whisky, and I’ll be fit to fight on the morrow.” He pulled the stopper and took a long drink.

“Bloody men,” Jinny whispered under her breath.

“Aye, that’s too right. Where would the lassies be without men to look after them?” The whisky hit his empty stomach and burned.

Jinny finished rubbing and examined her work. “You’re going to have a nasty scar.”

“Good.” He took another healthy swig. “The lassies like scars.”

“Oh do they now? I thought you might be done with your womanizing.” Jinny stoppered her pot. “And what about Miss Gyllis Campbell?”

Sean’s eyes flew open. “What about her?” If Jinny had been a man, Sean would have jumped to his feet, fists ready for a fight.

But Jinny chuckled. “Look at you, you big bear of a man. You’re smitten. You used to be quite free with the lassies, but I haven’t seen a one catch your eye in months.” The matron looked mighty proud of herself. “And I’d reckon all those trips to Ardchattan have had something to do with it.”

He grumbled into the flagon and drowned his next words. So what if he liked her? Christ, he’d already said he loved her. But did he love her like that? Sean glanced up at Jinny. The damned woman looked like she’d just swallowed the best plum duff ever made. “So? Gyllis needs me.” Her crutches were leaning against his clothing trunk with the sheepskin pads around the armrests. Thank God something was working as it should.

“Aye?” Jinny didn’t let it rest. “And how is she recuperating? You ken, some folks are never the same again after a bout of paralysis.”

“Gyllis will come good, mark me.” He flicked his hand toward the door. “Off with you now.”

The next morning, Sean couldn’t say what throbbed more, his head

or his blasted shoulder. But he wasn't about to call Jinny and ask for another application of her salve. Listening to her bloody opinions was worse than the pain. Besides, he had an ugly duty to perform and he might as well be in a foul mood for it.

He grimaced as he pulled on his shirt. He could scarcely lift his left arm. He reached for the flagon, but he'd drunk the damn thing dry. The chambermaid brought in a tray. "Angus said they'll be ready once you've broken your fast, m'laird."

"Is everyone looking after my health?"

"Aye. Everyone kens you didn't eat a thing all day yesterday and your shoulder is on the verge of turning putrid, and if you do not take care of it you're going to end up like your da and we'll not have a chieftain to replace you."

Sean stared at the lass. Now a skinny wisp of a girl was spewing the same rubbish he'd heard from Jinny?

She handed him a spoon and curtsied. "For your porridge, m'laird."

He snatched it from her and pointed to the door. "Go. Tell Angus I'll be down momentarily."

Sean had half a mind to leave the food, but it smelled too good. His stomach rumbled. Cook hadn't missed a thing, porridge, eggs, bacon and haggis. Suddenly ravenous, he ate every bite and then headed down to face his duty.

By the time Sean walked into the courtyard, Angus had the prisoners lined up on the gallows with their hands bound and nooses around their necks. The man-at-arms had carried out his duty efficiently, without a qualm.

Sean surveyed the faces of his men, all standing as witness to the hanging. Gawen stood away from the others on the far end. "Gawen, how do you know these men?" Sean asked.

The lad looked up as if shocked the chieftain knew his name. "Pardon, m'laird?"

"You heard me." Sean scowled. "Come forward and tell us about these scoundrels."

"I-I do not know them."

"Very well. Then you'll have no qualms kicking the stools out from under these outlaws' feet?"

The lad blanched. "N-no, m'laird."

Sean nodded at Angus who grasped Gawen by the arm and led him up the gallows' steps.

The cleric stepped forward and opened a scroll. "For the crime of attack on Sir Sean MacDougall, Chieftain of Dunollie with intent to do harm, you are sentenced to hang by the neck until dead. May God have mercy on your soul."

Gawen hesitated at the first stool. The lad glanced at Sean over his shoulder with fear in his eyes. Sean gave him a thin-lipped nod. Turning slowly, Gawen kicked the stool, followed by a clatter, a twang of the rope and a crack, breaking the man's neck. Death was never a pretty sight, even when it was done to rid the world of murderers—men who placed no value on human life. Sean had no idea how many people these men had killed or how many women they might have raped.

In the somber moment of the misty dawn only one thing was certain. Not one would live to pillage another day.

Chapter Fourteen

Sean mounted his horse and drove the beast like he was running from the devil. Aye, he'd attended hangings before, but he'd never presided over one as Chieftain of Dunollie. The image of the men swinging from their nooses, their feet kicking like beheaded chickens would be seared on his memory forever. Would he pass such severe punishment if again faced with the same circumstances? Yes. There would be no question. If not dealt with relentlessly, lawlessness would pervade Dunollie lands and his clan would suffer the consequences.

He rode full tilt all the way to Ardchattan Priory. When he pounded the knocker, the monk who answered didn't even ask him his purpose—one look at Sean's face and the man opened the door. "Miss Gyllis is in her cell."

"My thanks," Sean mumbled, carrying the crutches as he strode past.

Though he wanted to rush in and gather her in his arms, hold her for hours and ask her to take away the agony caused by hanging four brigands, he stood at the door and watched. She worked the embroidery needle, making painstakingly small stitches—something he knew would be difficult for her. The concentration on her face made his heart squeeze, but it wouldn't be right to try to help. She was a determined lass and would regain her strength as a result.

Something in her determination, her concentration soothed him. When he watched Gyllis, the evils of the world faded as if they no longer mattered. With Gyllis, his soul sailed to an island of peace.

When Sean rested the crutches against the wall, she looked up. "Sean!" She cast her sewing aside. "Thank heavens you're safe."

The corner of his mouth ticked up. "You heard?" He had hoped she would have been spared the burden.

"I've been so worried, I could scarcely think of anything else." Gyllis reached for his hand. "John reported you had injuries."

He kissed her hand and sat on the stool. "Just a bruise to the shoulder." He kept her palm in his. The softness of her skin soothed him as did the depth of the concern reflected in her eyes. The tension in his neck eased. "I hanged four outlaws today."

"My God." Gasping, she clapped her free hand over her mouth. "How awful."

"I hope 'tis not something I have to do often. I'd much rather fight a man than tie his hands and hang him—even if he is a scoundrel."

"But you risk injury by fighting."

Sean said nothing. Painfully aware of the open door behind him, all he could do was stare into those eyes. Gyllis could caress his soul

with a single look. And from her expression, he could read so much. She cared as deeply for him as he did her. So intense was the current holding their stares, he could not bring himself to look away.

Gyllis smiled, her dimples melting the tension from his shoulders to the base of his spine. “And what are you thinking about, sir knight?”

Sean grinned. “Why, the winsome maiden seated before me, miss.” With her tiny gasp, his blood rushed like a white-capped river.

He raised her hand to his lips, closed his eyes and kissed. There in that room with monks wandering about the halls, he was completely and utterly entranced with this woman. He’d never met anyone who could calm his deepest agony with a look. Her pulse thrummed a steady rhythm beneath his lips. If only they could be alone.

Long lashes shuttered those green eyes and for a brief moment, Sean felt lost.

“I know not what to say,” she whispered, a blush spreading across her cheeks.

He raised her chin with the crook of his finger. “Sometimes more is said with a look than with words.” He gestured to the wall behind. “I’ve returned your crutches complete with sheepskin armrests.”

She looked past him and beamed. “They are marvelous, and I’m certain I’ve grown stronger since your last visit.”

“Do you think you can make it out to the garden?”

“I’m sure I can.” She clapped her hands. “If I could use those things to walk outside the cloistered walls I would. I’ve felt so cosseted, what I wouldn’t do to sit a horse with the wind in my hair.”

Sean fetched the crutches. “Well, let us start by taking a stroll out into the sunshine.” He chuckled. The Gyllis he’d grown up with had gradually returned and gone was the skeletal, bitter lass. She’d put on a wee bit of weight and maneuvered her crutches with lip-biting determination. Aye, she indeed was a woman to be admired.

Though Sean hadn’t been able to visit the priory as often in the past few sennights, Gyllis’s heart swelled every time she saw him stride through the cloisters. Long legged, tall, and incredibly handsome, her problems faded into oblivion when the young chieftain came to call.

And on account of his generosity, in the past fortnight she had become more adept with her crutches. How wonderful it was to regain a modicum of freedom and tend to her most personal needs without a monk’s aid.

Today she and Brother Wesley were working in her tiny chamber due to a bout of morning drizzle. After John and Sean had their disagreement, her brother required the monk to keep the door ajar

when he ministered to her within. Gyllis pulled her woolen mantle around her shoulders. "'Tis difficult to believe only yesterday the sun provided a balmy day."

"Are you cold?" Brother Wesley asked. His voice always sounded so serene, it calmed her directly.

She tried not to shiver. "A wee bit."

"Shall I light the brazier?"

"Oh no, 'tis early yet, I'm sure the day will warm. Mother always says 'tis a waste of peat to burn it during the summer months."

"Your mother is a wise woman."

Gyllis reflected on her carefree upbringing at Kilchurn Castle. Ma had a way of running an efficient keep for certain. "I suppose she is."

"I have no doubt of her wisdom. Your brother is still young and is already a prior." He stopped massaging and arched his eyebrows. "Then there's Lord Duncan. He's one of the most powerful men in the Highlands—both men raised by *your* mother."

Gyllis smiled, though her heart squeezed. "Do not forget our father was Black Colin of Rome. He had something to do with our rearing for certain and his legacy alone will transcend generations."

Wesley grinned. "That it will."

"Good morrow," a deep voice came from the corridor.

Gyllis's heart leapt. "Sir Sean, what a pleasant surprise."

The good-looking laird strode inside, barely acknowledging Brother Wesley. "I have a surprise for you, m'lady." He grinned, his teeth flashing white, framed by the shadow of his beard. The chieftain's dark features and crystal blue eyes could stop her heart.

Her cheeks grew hot. She loved it when he referred to her as m'lady, though as a baron's daughter, her proper title was miss. Perhaps one day she would be able to again hope to marry into nobility. Gyllis's insides fluttered with anticipation. "Do tell me what it is."

Sean held out a lady's riding crop. "I'll wager you are well enough to sit a horse."

Gyllis clapped her hands. "Oh my, I'd love to ride again."

Brother Wesley stood. "You cannot possibly be serious."

"Why ever not?" Gyllis asked.

Spreading his palms to his sides, the monk looked incredulous. "Do you realize how dangerous it is? What if the horse rears and you were to fall? Besides, it takes strength of arm to ride."

Sean's fists snapped to his hips. "I assure you, we will exercise the utmost care."

"My arms have nearly made a full recovery." Gyllis grasped the crop. "Besides, it isn't as if I've never ridden before."

"But 'tis raining," Wesley persisted. "You could catch your death."

“Hardly a drop fell from the sky during my ride from Dunollie.” Sean collected the crutches from where they were propped against the wall. “Come, Miss Gyllis. Your gelding awaits.”

With a huff, Brother Wesley strode toward the door. “Do not complain to me if riding a horse sets you back sennights and ruins all my work.”

Gyllis watched the monk walk away, mumbling something akin to “ungrateful lass”. But his uncharacteristic chagrin didn’t dissuade her. She smiled up at Sean. “That’s the first time I’ve ever seen him irritated. I’m afraid he’s none too happy about your idea.”

Sean offered his hand. “If it were up to that pasty monk, you’d still be abed so he could run his fingers along your thighs through eternity.”

Gyllis placed her palm in his and allowed Sean to pull her up. “Oh please, Brother Wesley wants to see me well just as you do. He just doesn’t have an adventurous spirit like yours.”

Sean kissed her hand before giving her a crutch. “I doubt that.”

“You are insufferable.” She grasped it.

“How so?”

“You think that poor monk ogles me at his every chance.”

“I don’t think it.” Sean slid the second crutch under her arm. “I ken he does.”

Gyllis giggled. “Take me to this horse before I’m forced to wallop you with one of these crutches.”

He bent down and nuzzled into her ear. Goodness, he smelled fresher than a pine forest. “A fine lady like you wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

Tickles flitted all the way up her neck. If only her confidence would return, she might steal a wee kiss. “I cannot wait for you to spirit me away.”

Performing an exaggerated bow, he gestured toward the passageway and pulled her cloak from the peg on the wall. “Very well, m’lady.”

When they reached the stables, Sean’s man, Angus, led an old gelding up to them. Holding her hand to his nose, Gyllis let the horse smell her and then ran her fingers through his sorrel mane. “You’re a kind fella, are you not?”

Sean placed his warm palm on her waist. “If you’ll pass Angus your crutches, I’ll give you a lift.”

Her insides jumped like a swarm of butterflies had taken to flight. Leaning into him, Gyllis relinquished her crutches and held up her arms.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

She swallowed down her excitement. “Aye.” Sean’s large hands

squeezed ever so gently as he lifted her into the sidesaddle. The tang of pine and rugged male curled through her nostrils, making her head swoon. The horse sidestepped, bringing her back to earth. Once situated, Gyllis tried to raise her knee over the upper pommel, but she couldn't raise the miserable appendage high enough. She cringed.

Sean closed his fingers around her thigh. "Allow me to help."

Even through her skirts, his simple gesture made her shudder. A jolt of pleasure and need spread through her entire body. His touch was so different than Brother Wesley's, so much more rugged, yet reassuring…and exciting.

Not trusting her voice to speak, she nodded.

He grasped her ankle and grinned. Oh how incredibly handsome he was when he smiled. His azure eyes narrowed slightly with a wee crinkle at the corners, and his teeth gleamed healthy and white. Sean's gaze darkened as if he had a secret he wanted to share. Hot, raw energy passed between them while he took his time bending her knee and lifting it over the pommel. All the while, his fingers plied her thigh.

Gyllis caught her breath on a gasp and fanned her heated cheeks. "I think you rather enjoyed that."

He patted her knee. "I did." If his grin could grow more devilish, it did.

"You are bold."

When he leaned within a hand's breadth of her chin, his smile stretching his features, it was all she could do not to clasp his face between her palms and kiss him. But Sean's retinue of guards surrounded them. Gyllis sat upright and adjusted her skirts while watching him from the corner of her eye. Aye, she'd enjoyed the few kisses they'd shared, but she wouldn't lose her head. Things had grown so different. At one time she'd been awash with confidence, but her illness had stripped that away too. A lead ball suddenly sank in her stomach. She would never be able to bear it if Sean rejected her.

Of course ages ago, he'd said he loved her—words Gyllis would never forget. It wasn't as if he'd said it again, though. Yes, he did kiss her rather passionately. His love couldn't exactly be compared to brotherly love, but she was too clumsy for it to be real man and woman love. *Is there such a thing as kissing friends love?* She didn't know, and right now she didn't want to think beyond spending the afternoon with Sean.

He brushed her nose with the back of his knuckle. "Is boldness such a bad thing?"

A fire inflamed her cheeks and she fixated on the reins. "Nay," she admitted in a whisper.

"Exactly what are you doing?" John marched into the stable.

Gyllis lifted her reins. “Sir Sean is taking me riding.”

John crossed his arms and glared at the chieftain. “Not through Fearnoch Forest, ’tis not safe.”

Sean faced him. “I assure you my men have cleansed the forest of all outlaws.”

“Are you certain? You suffered attack yourself. Have you caught the culprits since we last spoke?”

“Four men hanged.” Sean placed his palm on John’s shoulder. “Has it been so long since we rode together you have forgotten our oath of brotherhood? You may have become a priest, but our bond of kinship will endure for a lifetime.”

John stopped and stared, then his shoulders dropped. “You are right. I would trust you not only with my life, but the lives of every soul in Ardchattan Priory.”

The two men grasped each other at the elbows—a sign of Highland kinship. Sean held firm. “I’ll have her back before compline.”

“I’d expect no less.”

Once Sean had mounted his stallion, they rode straight out the gates. The rocking motion of the horse beneath her gave Gyllis an enormous sense of freedom. “’Tis wonderful to ride again.”

Sean walked his horse alongside hers. “I thought you’d enjoy a jaunt away from the cloistered halls of the priory.”

A breeze picked up the hood of her cloak. “I couldn’t have thought of anything more invigorating myself.”

Thunder clapped overhead. Sean arched his brow and gave her a sideways glance. “I’d hoped to picnic beside the babbly burn at Glen Nant.”

Gyllis peered at the sky, swirling with grey clouds. *Please withhold the rain, if only for a little while*. She grinned. “What a lovely idea.”

Thunder rolled and Sean cringed. “I’m not so certain. I wouldn’t want to see you end up with the sweat or worse.”

“Perhaps if we increase our speed to a fast trot, we shall arrive sooner.” She glanced back toward the priory. The grey stone walls were as foreboding as a prison. In no way did she have any intension of turning around.

He stared at her for a long moment and then clicked his tongue. The entire retinue sped the pace to a trot. Droplets started falling, but this was Scotland. It always rained, but rarely did they have a lasting downpour.

“Thank you,” Gyllis said.

“A faster pace is going against my better judgment.” He flashed a wicked smile that tickled her insides. “But from the excitement in your eyes, I’d wager it would be too much of a disappointment not to give it a go.”

She giggled and slapped her riding crop, demanding a canter.

"Gyllis." Sean hastened after her. "You could fall."

She shot him a challenging grin. "Sean MacDougall, I swear you are the most adventurous man I know. Do you honestly want to amble along when there's a picnic to be had?"

His eyebrows waggled with his grin. "Since you put it that way…" His stallion lurched ahead.

Gyllis laughed. This was the wild lad she'd admired whilst she was growing up. She slapped her crop and loosened her reins, giving her horse his head. Together they rode at a moderate canter for miles, Gyllis unable to stop giggling. Though she knew Sean could ride much harder, she dared not try to push more. As it was, her legs bounced with the motion of the horse. One errant move and she might be flung from her saddle.

A sloppy raindrop splashed her face.

Lightning streaked and lit up the sky.

Sean slowed and Gyllis pulled up beside him, the sentries circling around. "A storm's coming for certain."

"Dunollie's only a mile away. 'Tis the closest shelter," said Angus.

Sean frowned as if he didn't care for the idea, but then he nodded. "I hope you do not feel it improper, seeing you are unaccompanied."

Gyllis scanned the staring faces. "You've an entire retinue of men." She slapped her crop and headed west as the skies opened up and doused them with a torrent.

When at last they rode through Dunollie's gates, Gyllis was soaked clean through and shaking like a sapling in the wind. Sean drove the horses past the stable, straight to the keep's huge, oaken doors. After dismounting, he strode directly to Gyllis's horse, his face awash with rainwater. Pushed away from his face, droplets splashed from his dark hair, soaking his cloak and linen shirt beneath. Her gaze dipped to the laces of his collar. Curls of hair peeked through the opening, the wet fabric plastered to his chest. God help her, she wanted to tug open the laces and gaze upon the treasure beneath. Raising his arms, his cloak opened, revealing more. The linen hugged every curve of his rigid chest—chiseled as if carved in stone. Dropping her gaze further, the cloth clung to undulating abdominal muscles akin to those hammered into the iron breastplate of a Roman god.

Before she could blink, he placed a hand upon her waist. "Come, we must see you warmed by the hearth."

Teeth chattering, she braced her hands on his shoulder while he slipped an arm beneath her knees and carried her up the stairs. Once inside, Sean turned full circle. "Light the fire in my mother's chamber," he bellowed.

“Straight away,” said Angus. “But it will take some time to warm the chill from the air.”

Sean tightened his grip. “’Tis summer, blast it all.”

A matron pattered across the hall. “You’re soaked to the bone, m’laird.”

“Miss Gyllis needs a change of clothes. Can you arrange a kirtle and shift?”

The woman wrung her hands. “Perhaps I can find something suitable.”

“Good. Have them sent up to my chamber forthwith.”

She clapped a hand to her chest whilst her eyes bulged. “*Your* chamber, m’laird?”

“Aye, Jinny,” Sean barked. “’Tis presently the only room without a draft. Angus, follow us with the basket. I’ll not be returning the lady to Ardchattan with even a hint of fever.”

Gyllis sneezed.

“Quickly!” Sean hastened toward the stairwell.

“Apologies.” She tried not to shiver and snuggled into him. Dripping wet, he was still as warm as a brazier. “I’m feeling well, honestly.”

“I’ll take no chances.” Skipping two steps at a time, at the first landing Sean proceeded through the passageway and pushed through the door. He carried Gyllis to a chair beside the hearth and gently set her down. She shivered when he pulled away—the warmth of his body no longer soothing her. But the smell of the chamber washed over her in a delicious fragrance of pine and musky male. *Sean’s scent.*

“The coals are still smoldering. I’ll just toss on a few sticks of wood and you’ll be toasty warm in no time.”

“Th-thank you.” Her teeth again chattered as she glanced back at the enormous four-poster bed across the room. Festooned with a green satin comforter and canopy, she wondered if Sean’s favorite color was green. She hoped so.

Sean brushed her cheek with the back of his finger. “Your cheeks are rosy.”

She clapped her hands to them. “Are they?”

“Aye.” His voice grew deeper. “I like them with a bit of color.”

When he turned and reached for the wood, a rap sounded at the door. Angus walked in, a basket slung from his elbow while he held a bundle of clothing at arm’s length so not to get it wet. “Jinny sent these up for the lady, m’laird.”

Sean tossed another stick of wood with a thump and straightened. “Where the devil is your wife?”

Angus shifted his weight between his feet, with water squishing out his boots. “Called to Morag’s cottage. The bairn is coming.”

A clap of thunder sounded beyond the stone walls, so loud the castle shook. Gyllis shuddered.

Sean gestured toward the bed. “Of all the miserable times for a woman to birth a wee one. Please set the things on the bed and go dry yourself.”

“Aye, m’laird.” Angus did as told and gave Gyllis an apologetic look. “Will you be needing anything else?”

Sean brushed off his hands. “Nay. I reckon all the womenfolk are at Morag’s?”

Angus nodded. “I guess I’ll leave you be, then.” But the old henchman didn’t make a move until Sean showed him to the door.

“No need to worry. I’ve managed far more difficult tasks.”

The corner of Angus’s mouth turned up. “You reckon?”

Gyllis knew what the henchman meant. It wasn’t easy for a cripple to dress. She pulled the wet hood from her head.

Sean clapped his back. “Off with you. Put something warm in your belly to stave off the cold.”

“I’ve just the vintage of whisky—”

Sean closed the door behind Angus and turned. Gyllis rubbed the outside of her arms, her teeth chattering.

“We must warm you.”

“I am c-coming good. The fire is crackling.” *If only the hearth were emitting a modicum of warmth*.

Sean gestured to the bed. “I should leave you to change.”

Gyllis glanced toward the pile of clothes all the way over on the bed and then the door. “I d-don’t think I can.”

“Pardon?” His eyes trailed down to her shoes, then he hit his head with the heel of his hand. “Forgive me. I’ll fetch them for you.”

A slow exhale whistled past Gyllis’s lips. “My thanks.”

He set the bundle on the small table beside her. “I had hoped Jinny would’ve come up to help you dress.” He shifted his feet. “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

“I think not. I should be able to manage.”

“Very well. I shall be right outside the door if you should need me.”

Gyllis bobbed her head in time to her chattering teeth.

Sean sidestepped to the door. “You’re certain you’ll be all right?”

“A-a-aye.” She clapped a hand over her mouth and sneezed.

“Bloody hell, Gyllis, you best not be coming down with a fever.”

She flicked her hand through the air. “Would you be off? I’ll catch my death with your dawdling.”

He grasped the latch. “Apologies.”

She waited until the door clicked shut. Then the realization that she was alone sunk in. No one had brought her crutches above stairs.

Gyllis studied the pile of clothes. Once the dexterity of her fingers had returned, she'd been able to do most everything herself—aside from anything that required her to stand. She wiggled her bottom and tested the chair. It was indeed sturdy.

After shrugging out of her cloak and loosening the laces of her kirtle and shift, she had an easy enough time gathering her skirts and pulling them up to her hips. She planted her feet firmly on the floor and bore down while using her hands to lift herself with the armrests. Once up, she released one hand and grasped her skirts. Her legs shuddered under the strain and cold. The damp cloth stuck to her skin and the harder she tugged the more it seemed to stick.

With a grunt, the muscles in her thighs gave out and she collapsed back into the chair with her kirtle up past her knees. Gyllis took a deep breath. *I've been pulling myself to a stand and walking with crutches. Surely it will be easier if I stood. I've the chair to lean on if need be. Goodness, 'tis more difficult trying to brace myself in a crouch*.

Again she grasped the armrests. With one deep inhale, she pushed herself up. Once certain her legs would support her weight, she released her hands and tugged the kirtle over her head. Knees wobbling a bit, she gathered up her damp shift. After she pulled it off, the warmth from the hearth radiated across her skin and her teeth ceased their chattering.

Enlivened by her ability to stand unassisted, Gyllis faced the table and reached for the dry linen shift. The kirtle tumbled to the floor, revealing a set of modern stays. She hadn't worn stays since she'd come down with paralysis. There'd been no need. But she would look so much prettier with her bosoms supported with fashionable wooden slats.

Stepping forward, she reached her hand out to brush her fingers across the feminine garment. The table teetered. Her knees buckled. Before she could fling her arms out, she crumpled to the floor with a shriek.

"Curses." She cringed at the throbbing pain in her hip. *I shall never be able to fend for myself*.

The door burst open. "God's teeth, are you hurt?" Sean dashed across the floor.

Gyllis clutched the shift atop her breasts and hastened to cover her nether parts. "I had a wee fall. Leave me." She turned her face to hide from him. There was nowhere to run even if she could spring up. Dear Lord, why must she bear this humiliation in front of Sean?

Without moving, he gaped at her, his eyes huge. This wasn't like having a monk help her with necessities. Without a stitch of clothing aside from the garment in her arms, Sean could see every inch of her naked flesh. Yes, concern stretched the features of his face, but

something deeper smoldered in his eyes.

Revulsion came to mind.

Gyllis wanted to curl into a ball and crawl under the bed. How utterly devastating to have Sean see her in a state of complete undress, totally helpless, sprawled on the floor. Her spine curled. “Please do not draw out my humiliation. As soon as I am covered you can return me to Ardchattan.”

He stepped closer. “Why would I do that?”

“How can you possibly want to keep company with the likes of me?” She turned her face away. “I am a useless cripple.”

“Nay.” He kneeled beside her. Why he wouldn’t flee the chamber and leave her in wretched peace, Gyllis couldn’t fathom. “When I look at you I see an extraordinary woman who was stricken by infirmity. A beautiful lass who has the strength to fight, who will not remain abed and give up.”

She grimaced, clutching the shift tighter to her body. “How can you stand the sight of me—an enfeebled, worthless lass? You are strong and full of life. You are brave.”

“You think I’m brave? My courage is nothing compared to yours. Before me I see a woman who will not be cut down by a devastating illness, who will look it in the face, grasp it with both hands and fight. Not only today, but you continue to fight, to work through your pain and agony so one day this will be behind you.”

A tear slipped from her eye and dribbled down her face until it dropped from her chin and splashed her chest. “You cannot possibly mean that. I’m hideous.”

“Look at me,” he whispered in her ear.

She shook her head. “I cannot.” She was wretchedly naked for heaven’s sake.

“Please.” He placed his fingers on her far cheek and lightly kissed the other. “Look into my eyes, Gyllis.”

Oh heavens how she wanted to, but if she gazed into his crystal blue eyes, he’d see the fear in her own.

Thunder clapped outside and the rain slapped against the stone outer walls.

Sean leaned forward until Gyllis could no longer hide her face. He smelled of wood smoke and fresh pine. Her lips trembled as she slowly raised her lids. Though her vision was distorted by tears, she’d never seen a more beautiful sight.

“Why do you think I’ve been to visit you so often?” he asked.

“I don’t know…”

He arched a single brow. “I think you do.”

Gyllis wouldn’t succumb to his handsome face. She was wretched—helpless. “We were childhood friends. You feel sorry for me.” That’s

what she'd told herself over and over.

He brushed a wisp of hair from her face. "I love you, Gyllis Marietta Campbell. I said it before and I meant it."

Oh God in heaven, she wanted to believe it. "How can you? I am despicable." Streams of tears dribbled down both cheeks. Yes, she wanted to believe him, but she couldn't. "I cannot even manage to pull a shift over my head." She again turned her face away. *By the stars, I love him more than life itself and want nothing more than to pledge my love, but not here. Not like this*.

"Allow me to assist you." His voice was softer than a kitten's purr.

Chapter Fifteen

Sean clasped his hand over Gyllis's fist. She had it clamped so tightly around the shift, he wondered if she'd ever be able to let go. Truth be told, he was damn cold himself, but Gyllis came first. In no way would he be the cause of a setback to her health. She'd come so far in the past month, he couldn't bear to think of a relapse or worse. "Let us pull the shift over your head. Once you are covered, I'll lift you back to the chair."

She pursed her pouty lips. "I can do it."

"Are you certain? I promise to uphold the laws of chivalry." Though it would most likely kill him to do so.

She smiled for the first time since he'd entered the chamber. "Avert your eyes please."

Heaven help him, she could melt a heart of stone with her dimples. But Sean obediently stood and faced the hearth. "I am your servant, m'lady."

A muffled giggle came from her direction. Sean heaved a sigh. Thank heavens she wasn't completely devastated that he'd barged into the chamber whilst she curled up naked on the floor. A fire flared in his groin. Once he'd realized she wasn't hurt, it was all he could do to keep from scooping her into his arms and carrying her to the bed. Blast his hot-blooded urges. Did she have no idea how alluring she was? He cared not about her illness. Gyllis's charm grew every time he laid eyes on her.

Sean's gaze darted toward a flicker. He forced himself to choke back his gasp. Her reflection in the mirror caught him completely unaware. The cloth rustled behind him, but across the room, he had a delectable view of creamy white skin. Her breasts were round and pert, tipped by buds of rose. He licked his lips and stretched his fingers. Desire shot through him so strongly, he swayed in place. *Damn it all, control yourself*. No matter how much he wanted to collect the lass in his arms and shower her with adoration, he must refrain. He was a knight, a man of honor. In no way could he show Gyllis disrespect. She was an angel from God, her body a temple.

The shift dropped over her head and concealed her breasts while she worked to push her arms through the sleeves. Before her head popped through the neckline, Sean averted his gaze from the mirror and rubbed his eyes. He shouldn't have allowed himself to look, but the lass was too beautiful for any mortal man to resist.

He shivered, suddenly remembering he, too, was soaked through. Stepping closer to the flame, he held out his hands and savored the warmth.

“If you’d be so kind as to help me up,” she said in a voice smoother than honeyed mead.

Sean turned. Gyllis had not only pulled the shift on, she wore the kirtle atop, laced as if she were ready for Sunday mass. She glanced toward the stays on the table and bit her bottom lip. “I nearly have everything in order.”

She needn’t apologize. He remembered seeing her at Beltane. She’d been cosseted by one of those newfangled contraptions. He hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but holy mother, why would she want to crush her breasts now? And why had Jinny sent the miserable garment up? He couldn’t help his lopsided grin. “I prefer you without the stays.”

In the blink of an eye, her face turned scarlet. “’Tis said they keep a woman’s bosoms from sagging.”

He chuckled. “Oh do they now?” If only he could tell her how perfectly round her breasts were, but then she’d know he’d stolen a peek. Instead, he knelt. “Shall I lift you?”

Gyllis pinched the sleeve of his shirt and rubbed it between her fingers. “You’re so wet, you might soak me through again. Are you not cold?”

An involuntary shiver shuddered across his chest. “I am a bit.” He straightened, pulled off his shirt and cast it aside. “That’s better.”

Gyllis gulped, her eyes blinking. “I-I-I. Oh my goodness.”

Afraid he had a leech attached to his belly, Sean glanced down but saw nothing but muscle. “Is something amiss?”

She clapped a hand to her chest. “Nay, but it has been a long time since I saw you sparring in the courtyard without your shirt.”

He liked her reaction. It made him want to beat his chest and bellow. The look on her face was perfect. Rosy cheeks, red lips and green eyes as round as gold sovereigns, Sean could have scooped her into his arms and ravished her. Instead, he grinned dumbly. “Shall I lift you now?”

She smoothed her hands over her skirts and looked up with a coy grin. “Weren’t we planning to picnic?”

He glanced at the basket on the bed. “Aye.”

“Why not eat here in front of the hearth? Then your breeks can dry as well.” She fanned her face as if she’d had an errant thought. Sean hoped she had—thoughts akin to his own.

“Wonderful idea.” He jumped up and fetched the basket. “I’ve some wine to warm our insides.”

She clasped her hands. “Splendid.”

Sean moved to the sideboard and poured two goblets of wine from the ewer, thanking his stars the master brewer had brought him a new vintage only the day before. When he returned to the hearth, Gyllis

lifted the cloth from the basket. “And what did Cook prepare for us?”

Sean set the goblets on the floor and sat on the plaid rug beside her. He peered inside the basket, not sure. “Looks like sliced mutton, bread and cheese.”

She reached in and pulled out a sprig of red grapes, pulled one off and popped it in her mouth. Her eyes widened as she chewed. “Mm, a burst of tartness.”

Sean glanced at the fruit in her hand. As if she read his thoughts, she plucked the plumpest grape and held it to his lips. “You must taste.”

The fire in his groin inflamed while she placed it on his tongue. Then the vixen kept her finger on his lip as he closed his mouth. She giggled and ran her finger across his bottom lip. Christ almighty, did she know how seductive she looked?

Biting down, tart juice spurted throughout his mouth, tickling the underside of his jaw. “Delicious.”

She leaned closer. “I want to taste it too.”

Sean needed no more encouragement. He slid his hand behind her neck and cradled her head. She smelled sweeter than the grape he held in his mouth and the closer her lips neared, the hotter the flame beneath his breeks grew. He hardly noticed the damp wool—for all he could tell, it had already dried. God knew his flesh was hot enough to singe it.

When their lips met, Gyllis’s gentle moan vibrated through his chest. Her cool fingers smoothed up his abdomen and around his back as she entwined her tongue with his.

The lass learns quickly. “Do you ken what that does to me?”

Her inhale stuttered. “Nay, but if it makes heat flare deep inside your body, I’ve some idea.” Her voice grew breathless.

No stranger to the temptations of the bedchamber, Sean tightened every muscle in his body to bring his lustful urges under control. He would not take advantage of Gyllis, not ever. She was as fragile as a glass ornament, to be put on a pedestal and admired.

“You are the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

Holy Christ. He took a deep breath. *I must resist*. Then he looked into her eyes—moss encircled by dark blue. She smoothed her delicate fingers back and forth over his chest. With each feathery caress, his nipples grew harder, sending shocks of heat straight to his cock—now as rigid as an iron pole. In one motion, Sean pulled her onto his lap and covered her mouth with a smothering, claiming kiss. He wanted Gyllis like he wanted no other woman in the world and now her supple bottom cradled his ravenous cock.

She moved her hips, rubbing along his length. He hadn’t been with a woman in so long, he’d lose control with one more shift of her hips.

But he could not bring himself to stop kissing her. Gradually, he lowered her to the floor and lay her down. His hand slid from her waist and cupped her breast. In unison they moaned. Round and full, he kneaded her all the while joining with her mouth.

Trailing his fingers to her kirtle laces, he tugged the bow free and slipped his fingers beneath her neckline. Pushing it aside, he exposed her rounded flesh. With one more tug, the succulent nipple he'd seen in the mirror stood erect for him.

He barely noticed the rumbling thunder outside.

Gyllis gasped. "I cannot resist you."

"Why would you want to do that?" Sean flicked out his tongue and tasted the sweet rosebud standing proud before him. He took her fullness into his mouth and savored her taste. Heaven help him, his cock jutted against her hip, ready to burst with a single stroke.

Gyllis writhed beneath him, mewling like a virgin goddess. "This is the most diverting picnic I have ever attended."

Sean swirled his tongue around her blessed nipple. "I must agree with you there."

A rap came from the door. "M'laird?" It was Angus's voice.

"A moment." Sean helped Gyllis resituate her shift and kirtle then crossed the floor and opened the door.

Angus stood with Gyllis's crutches in hand, his expression grave. "The burn's flooded. Worse, the keep's surrounded by water. There's no way out."

"So quickly?"

"You've been up here for ages and all the while the rain's been coming down in sheets."

Sean glanced back at Gyllis.

"Is everything well?" she asked.

He told her about the rain. "'Tis looking as if you may need to stay at Dunollie."

She clapped a hand over her mouth and looked toward the window. "Oh heavens. John will be furious."

"He'd be a might angrier if we tried to cross a flooding river in a downpour."

Angus handed him the crutches. "The lassie's chamber is warm and ready." He glanced sidewise and leaned in. "It might be best for her reputation if you moved her straight away."

"Are the men talking? Already?"

"Cook's served the evening meal—aye, the rumblings started when you didn't come down, m'laird."

By the looming grey sky beyond the narrow window, Sean couldn't tell what time of day it was. "I'd best inspect the extent of the flooding."

“’Tis grave, m’laird. There’ll be a number of crofters in need of help for certain.”

Sean started to close the door. “I shall meet you in the great hall after I have Miss Gyllis settled in her chamber.”

“I’ll inform the guard.”

“My thanks.” Crutches in hand, Sean faced the lady. He hated to put an end to their picnic, but it was for the best. In no way could he sully her reputation. “We’d best see you to the guest chamber, or we’ll nay avoid a scandal.”

“Oh dear.” She slipped her fingers to her well-kissed mouth. “I’m afraid I was so overcome, I considered not the consequences.”

“I should have thought of it.” He ambled toward her. “’Tis my responsibility. But fear not, I’ll ensure no ill befalls you on account of my folly.”

He knelt beside her and gestured to the crutches in his hand. “Would you prefer to use these, or should I carry you?”

“As much as I’d prefer to be in your arms, I fear someone may see us.”

“Och, aye. That would help your reputation not at all.” He winked. “But there’s a secret door that adjoins the lady’s chamber to mine.”

“Truly? A secret passage akin to one in a storybook?”

Sean pointed. “’Tis behind the tapestry.”

She stroked her chin. “Do the servants ken about it?”

“Not likely. I only discovered it when I moved into the chamber after Da passed.”

“How scandalous.” She giggled. “Do you think your parents used it?”

“Perhaps.” He’d never really considered it, and as an only son, he now wondered if his parents had a happy marriage. His mother was an Irish lass, married to Sean’s da by an arrangement, as marriages often are. Presently there was no time to ponder it. He stooped to help her up. “Though I doubt we’ll see a soul in the passageway, let us make a show of walking to the outer door.”

She held on to his arm with one hand and reached for a crutch. “Very well, but I shall miss you.”

“I’m afraid there won’t be much to entertain you whilst I’m making the rounds.”

“Have you anything to read?”

He looked at the leather-bound Bible on the sideboard and pointed. “Only scripture.”

She smiled. “’Tis better than doing nothing.”

Once he retrieved the book, they proceeded to the lady’s chamber. Sean hated to leave her alone, but he had a clan to look after. He opened the door. “I’ll have Cook bring you a tray.”

She'd become quite adept with her crutches and easily moved inside. "Thank you." Gyllis regarded him over her shoulder, her tongue sneaking to the corner of her mouth. "Will you check on me when you return?"

"Not sure. I'm afraid it will be too late." Besides, if he came to her later, he might not be able to control himself. Indeed, Lusty Laddie could rear his lovesick head and Duncan would be fully within his rights to chop it off. Sean fingered a lock of her chestnut hair. "I wish I could stay, but my clan must come first."

"I ken." She nimbly turned and stepped up to him, her face a hand's breadth away. "I like kissing you, Sir Sean."

She placed a palm on his cheek and turned up her mouth. Thank God they'd seen no one else in the passageway because there was no way in heaven Sean would be able to resist those succulent lips. He paused and drew in a ragged breath. Then he slowly lowered his lips until they met hers. Sliding his fingers around her waist, he didn't want to hurry. With languid licks of his tongue, he savored her, enjoying the lingering tartness from the grapes. She melted into him, her pliable breasts caressing his chest, bringing on another torturous erection. If only he could take her inside and explore every inch of her silken flesh with his tongue.

He forced his hand to stray to the latch. "I shall see you on the morrow."

Chapter Sixteen

Gyllis smoothed her fingers over the page. Randomly she'd opened the Bible to II Samuel and read about how King David watched Bathsheba bathe. Doubtless, she couldn't have opened it to the Book of Job. Sean had held her in his clutches and she'd needed no constricting stays to swoon in his arms. Who knows what would have happened had Angus not come to the door when he did. As it was, she'd allowed Sean to bare her breasts and fondle them. Her nipples still tingled at his heavenly touch.

As sure as she'd opened the Holy Book to King David's sin, God would punish her severely for enjoying Sean's touch so much. And now she craved it. Worse, reading about King David's lust served to further ignite the flames smoldering at such depths of her body, she'd never imagined so powerful an emotion.

She set the Bible beside her on the bed and reclined against the lush pillows. Appointed with a large four-poster bed, the lady's chamber was twice the size of her rooms at Kilchurn. Across the floor, a fire crackled in the hearth. They had even drawn the furs across the window to keep out the chill.

Gyllis let out a long sigh and trailed her fingers over her breast. It still tingled as if Sean's lips continued to suckle her. How on earth would she ever forget this day? That she didn't want to forget was a certainty—nor had she wanted it to end. *I am a wanton woman. God will strike me down for this*.

She rolled onto her side and covered her face with her hands. *Why does sin feel so good if it is a terrible thing? A person should feel awful if they sin—like I do when I tell a fib or something akin to that.*

Watching the crackling fire, she was well aware the hour had grown late. Ages ago, a serving boy had brought up a tray of food. But sleep eluded her like a rainbow's end. *How can I sleep when so many thoughts fill my head? Heaven help me, my entire body is tingling with happiness for the first time in ever so long.*

A door slammed. She sat upright. The candle beside her bed had nearly burned to a nub. Footsteps came from behind her headboard. *Sean's chamber*. Gyllis held very still and listened. Something clattered to the floor that made her jolt. She held her breath. Rustling, perhaps cloth, followed by footsteps.

She couldn't mistake the sound of the bed creaking. Gyllis swallowed and clutched the bedclothes to her chin. The image of Sean in his bed did unholy things to her mind. *Does he wear a nightshirt? Does he keep his dirk under his pillow? What does his face look like when he's sleeping? Is it as beautiful as when he's alert? Does he sleep on his*

back or otherwise?

The bed creaked—louder this time. Still clutching the bedclothes, Gyllis scooted to the edge of her bed. Heavy footsteps clapped the floorboards followed by a hiss. She inclined her ear toward the wall. *Is he dancing?* The floor groaned as if he were moving in a rhythmic pattern. *I do not recall a rocking chair in his chamber*.

Gyllis reached for her crutches. As quietly as she could, she slid behind the tapestry and felt for the latch. When it clicked, she gasped and froze in place. Something hissed through the air, followed by more footsteps. But the sound wasn't up close. It came from across the chamber, near the hearth. After opening the door far enough to slip inside, she maneuvered the crutches out from behind Sean's tapestry and popped her head out from beneath it.

In the blink of an eye, she couldn't breathe, and the thrumming of her heart consumed her entire body. Now she knew exactly how King David felt when he gazed down upon Bathsheba. The great Chieftain of Dunollie wore not a thread of clothing.

Sean swung his sword in an arc over his head, lunging into a crouch where he stopped, the sword and his arm forming perfectly parallel lines.

Lit by a candelabra and the fire from the hearth, the room glowed amber and smelled of beeswax and wood smoke. The flickering light cast a dreamy shroud over the chamber and filled it with dark shadows, but nothing appeared more surreal than Sean's naked body flexing with his every move.

Gyllis's hands trembled as she stared at Sean's chiseled back. He mustn't have heard her, because he held the crouched position like a statue. His dark, wavy locks brushed broad shoulders, rounded by thick muscle. He straightened slowly, the undulating muscles in his back contracting until he stood straight. His waist narrowed, supported by hips that appeared chiseled from pure marble. His rounded buttocks dimpled at the sides and curved down to long, slender thighs, peppered with dark hair.

He lunged to the right, the big sword hissing through the air. But this time he thrust his weapon as if defending himself from attack. On and on he fought the demons, slashing, thrusting and spinning with his blade. When he next straightened, he faced her holding the sword high above his head.

Gyllis had seen his chest only that evening, but the muscles rippling over his abdomen appeared even more defined in the glowing light. A line of black hair trailed from his navel, pulling her eyes lower. That a man had a splay of curls over his sex as she did surprised her, as did the alabaster length of this manhood at his apex. Aye, she'd seen animals mate, and was aware men were different, but

never guessed they were so amazingly so. She had never gazed upon pure beauty before this moment.

Clapping a hand over her mouth, Gyllis tried to muffle her gasp.

Sean's gaze snapped to her face. Before she could blink, he bellowed an inhuman roar and barreled toward her. In one motion, he spun her around. The crutches clattered to the floor as he leveled the sword against her neck. "I'll not tolerate a spy."

"I-I heard…I-I did not—"

"Gyllis?" Immediately he dropped the sword with a resounding racket and released his hold. "I'm sor—"

She tried to pull away but crumpled to the floor. "Forgive me." Tears welled in her eyes as she shook with mortification. "I did not mean to intrude. I was awake and heard…"

"Nay, nay, nay." Sean dropped to his knee beside her. Gyllis tried to avert her gaze, but he was so amazingly naked. He lifted her into his arms as if she weighed nothing and ran kisses along her cheek and neck. "I am the one who must ask for forgiveness. I've no idea what I was thinking. I saw movement and assumed someone had spirited inside."

Gyllis looked into his eyes and began to tremble. It was as if he hadn't recognized her, as if he were in some sort of trance. "You were like a madman for a moment."

"Apologies. I was concentrating—not thinking straight. No one has ever entered my chamber when I've been—ah—sparring with the devil." He nuzzled into her tresses. "You ken I would never do anything to hurt you." Still cradling her to his bare chest, he stood and walked to the bed. Gently he set her on the mattress then kneeled before her, holding her hands between his palms.

Filled with concern, his eyes flickered gold, reflecting the fire from the hearth. Her overwhelming curiosity had led her straight into the fabled lion's den. And now the gentle beast had lured her under his spell of beauty. *My stars, he even smells as wild as a pine forest.* Gyllis stared for a long while, then moistened her lips and nodded once, never breaking their gaze. That he was naked before her seemed as natural as breathing, except for the tight yearning that ached so badly, she had to steal at least one more kiss. Even her breasts were afire. He'd kissed them earlier and it had been sinfully delectable.

Will God forgive me as he had his servant King David?

Continuing to hold his gaze, she slipped her hands from his and untied her shift's bow—just as he'd done earlier. She took in a staccato breath, aware of what she was doing, but not fearing the consequences. Sean watched motionless as she slipped the linen from one shoulder and then the other. Then he reached up and tugged the cloth down to her waist, fully exposing her breasts.

A feral growl rumbled from his throat. “God help me, you are the most beautiful woman on earth.”

His features were shrouded by the dim light, but the darkness made the world seem like a dream. With a low moan, Sean cupped her breast and joined his mouth with hers. Gyllis kissed him back with all the passion she could muster, allowing him to guide her. She grew bolder and lightly suckled his tongue while he swirled it deeper in her mouth.

As he eased the kiss, Sean trailed his lips down her neck. Gyllis sank her fingers into the thick bands of flesh on his shoulder while he continued lower. Met with jagged flesh, the wound he’d sustained when attacked in Fearnoch Forest was no scratch. Rather than spoil the moment with a gasp, Gyllis inclined her head and ran kisses along his puckered flesh. “I shall ease your pain.”

“I feel no pain when I am with you.”

She gasped when his tongue circled the tip of her breast. So sensitive, a flame burst inside as if it were fanned by a blacksmith’s bellows. Gyllis threw back her head and moaned as he kneaded her breasts and plied them with his tongue. “Your wiles seduce me to the point of madness,” she managed a breathless whisper.

“’Tis only a sampling of what is to come.”

Gyllis ran her fingers through Sean’s hair, wanting more of something she knew nothing about. When she could take no more she pulled his face to hers and kissed him. Showed him how the passionate urges churned within her. And now she’d seen him bare, she wanted to know what it was like to be taken by not just a man, but by Sean MacDougall, the man she’d adored all her life. “I want to lie with you, Sean.”

“Sweeter words I have never before heard.” Again his lips trailed down the length of her neck, but this time he didn’t stop at her breasts. No, Sean’s feather-light kisses continued down her flesh. Gooseflesh rose across her skin when he swirled his tongue in her navel. Then he grinned and glanced up at her, his white teeth glowing through the dim light.

With a devilish chuckle, he pulled the pillows behind her. “Ease back and I will take you to heaven.”

“What…”

“Wheesht.” He placed his palm on her shoulder and encouraged her to lie against the pillows. “Are you comfortable?”

“Aye.” Though her breasts were exposed, her flesh tingled everywhere.

Sean tugged up her shift.

“No.” Gyllis shoved her hands down. “Sean.”

He eased her fingers away. “I cannot take you to heaven without

kissing the treasure between your legs."

Gyllis sat up. "You're planning to do what?" She squeezed her knees together. "Is that done?"

"Not often." He grinned again, looking like a temptation on a silver platter. "But I guarantee you will be begging me for more." He kissed her mouth and eased her back into the cushions. The length of his naked body pressed against her. His warm chest molded into her breasts, but that was nowhere near as shocking as the length of his manhood filling the crux of her body. Moaning, she rocked her hips, seeking more friction. Agony that good absolutely had to be sinful.

But Sean didn't remain atop her for long. Again, he slid down to his knees and tugged up her shift. This time Gyllis didn't fight him. Cool air caressed her womanhood. Sean's deep, rumbling sigh made dampness pool between her legs. "Your scent is so bonny, it will bring me undone." He placed a palm on her abdomen and spread her legs wider with his shoulders.

Gyllis had never felt so wicked. She grasped the bedclothes on either side. When his tongue stroked her, a shrill gasp erupted from her throat. Holy Mother Mary, she'd never experienced anything so erotic in her life. Again he licked her. Gyllis bucked. *Yes, more. Please, more*. Sean complied with swirls of his tongue.

He slid his finger down and circled it below—yet another action that sent her mind into a maelstrom of hot, driving need. His finger slid in and out while his tongue performed pure magic. Gyllis could no sooner pull away than she could run a mile. With uncontrollable shuddering, her voice made high-pitched noises while she succumbed to his touch. Suddenly her entire body went taught. A cry caught in the back of her throat. Sean rumbled a groan that spread tremors through her body. With a shocking gasp, the entire world shattered into pulsing bursts of euphoria.

By the time Gyllis recovered her senses, Sean had pulled her shift down over her knees. He stood and grinned. "Was it good for you lass?"

"Good?" she asked. "There are no words…"

"I ken." He grinned—the devilish one that made her heart leap.

When Gyllis's gaze slid down to his erection, Sean almost lost his seed. Her face was so seductive, yet innocent. Her wide-eyes made him want to roar like a lion, climb between her legs and make his conquest. But Gyllis was no alehouse tart who could warm his bed at night and be forgotten by morning.

Though it did unholy things to him to have her watch him, he would be no kind of knight if he took advantage.

Her lips parted almost as if she were planning to place her mouth

on him. Sean's knees buckled.

"But you are not satisfied?" she asked, her voice filled with wonder.

He cleared his throat so as not to expose his lust. "I cannot take your innocence, lass."

"I do not understand." She crossed her arms over her breasts, shielding them from him. "I give you my maidenhead. There is no other man on earth I wish to possess it."

'Twas a bold statement, even coming from Gyllis. "'Tis a gift I cannot take lightly."

"I do not give it lightly."

His mouth dried as if he'd been a week without water. "Do you ken what you're saying?"

"Aye." Her gaze drifted to his manhood again, then she did something completely unexpected. Without his bidding, she wrapped her lithe fingers around his shaft. "Show me."

God save him, no mortal man could resist the tug of her hand. He threw back his head and leaned his hips into her. "You will drive me to the brink of madness."

She had the gall to chuckle. "Like you did me?" She smoothed her fingers down and then back up. Where on earth did she learn to do that? "Come, I'm not completely unwise. I've seen a guard hidden in the shadows with a serving maid. Please, Sean. Show me."

He couldn't think with her hand milking his cock. With a feral growl, he nudged her deeper onto the bed and climbed between her legs.

She cupped his face in her hands. "Who were you sparring with?"

"My inner demons."

"I've never seen a more beautiful sight."

Sean chuckled. "You are the beautiful one, lass, and I'll nay let you forget it." He slid his member up the crux of her legs, allowing her moisture to spread over him. She shuddered. He lowered his head and kissed her. "Can you taste yourself on my lips? 'Tis the scent that attracts me every time I'm within arm's reach of you."

"You are a lusty laddie, are you not?" She rocked her hips beneath him, mewling softly. "Show me how lusty you are."

Her hips arched up and caught the tip of his cock. Sean held his breath. Hot moisture brimmed around him. God, he could come right now, but he wanted to make this good for her. Show her exactly what she'd been missing all these years. "I'll try to be gentle."

She nodded, her hips continuing their seductive rhythm. Christ, he was supposed to be the one seducing Gyllis, but without a lick of schooling she'd proven an expert. Slowly, he pushed inside. She sucked in a shocked gasp.

Sean froze. “Am I hurting you?” He started to pull away. “If you want to stop…”

Her fingers clamped into his buttocks. “No.” With a firm tug, she urged him deeper. God, he loved this woman. Gradually he slid the length of her, and when he reached a wall he gazed into her sultry eyes. Even in the dim light he could see the moss encircled by dark blue. “Are you all right?”

She wriggled beneath him. “Heavenly.”

“Once I start, I’ll not be able to stop myself.”

“There’s more?”

“Aye lass.”

Her fingers again dug into his buttocks. “I want to experience it all.”

Sean tried to be gentle at first, but with Gyllis’s hands kneading his backside, he soon lost all sense. Her breathing sped. Her scent ensnared him. Stars flashed across his vision and his ballocks packed so taut, he thought he’d go mad before he released his seed.

Faster and faster he thrust. Gyllis cried out, holding on to him for dear life. And now that she’d reached her peak, he was free to drive hard and fast. His breathing sped, his heart hammered, and all at once the peak of ecstasy flooded through his blood. A heartbeat before his seed released, he pulled out and spilled into the bedclothes.

He hated the unsatisfactory finish to his release, but he would not sire a bastard, even though he fully intended to make Gyllis his wife. He had not yet proposed—something he’d need to do soon.

He held himself over her with his elbow, careful not to crush her. God, she defined beauty, her intoxicating green eyes staring up at him as if they were the only two people in Scotland. He trailed kisses down her neck. “Was it good for you, lass?”

A wee giggle tickled his ear. “Aye. I cannot believe how good.”

“You are the world to me.” Breathing deeply to catch his breath, he rolled to his back and pulled Gyllis atop him. “You ken I love you, always will.”

She rested her head on his chest. “I love you, too. ’Tis as if God intended for our souls to be joined.”

He ran his fingers through her hair and cherished the silkiness of it. The woman in his arms filled his nostrils with fragrance from heaven. Even a bed of rose petals would not smell as sweet. He could lay there all night with Gyllis entwined in his embrace. And he fully intended to lose himself in her wiles until the sun rose on the morrow.

Chapter Seventeen

A ray of light streamed in from the window. The rain had stopped. Sean blinked several times in succession and rubbed his eyes. Gyllis slept cradled in the crook of his arm, her long tresses spread across his bare chest. Her breathing rhythmic, she was as radiant as an angel. Dipping his chin, he nuzzled into her hair and inhaled. *Mm.* As sweet as a meadow of wildflowers, he could breathe her in for an eternity.

Last night she'd taken him soaring to the moon. He almost regretted the sun had decided to make an appearance this day. He wasn't one to laze about, but spending an entire day making love to Gyllis tempted him.

The crutches sprawled on the floor caught his eye and his stomach twisted. She was yet to complete her treatment at the priory. He closed his eyes tightly. *Dear God in heaven, please do not let me be the cause of any setback*.

She moaned and moved in his arms. A more beautiful creature could not exist. In slumber she embodied the meadow nymph dreaming in the morning's sun. Mahogany tresses tangled around them both, her dark lashes shuttering those eyes he adored. Her lips slightly parted and she sighed. If only he could be there with her in such a soothing dream.

Sean hadn't intended to take advantage of her. It had happened. She'd been right when she said their souls were meant to be together. He knew that now, but he couldn't stand in the way of the progress she was making toward recovery. And then he had his uncle's wedding hanging over his head. Though Lorn had the king's approval, the neighboring clans would not be happy, especially the Campbells of Argyll. Gyllis's sect, the Campbells of Glenorchy paid fealty to Argyll. Relations could become strained, even between Sean and Duncan. He hated feuds.

He'd need to wait until news of the wedding had passed, especially since he would be the one providing protection for the Lord of Lorn.

Gyllis cleared her throat and stirred.

Sean grinned. "Good morrow, my love."

She rose up on her elbow and covered her mouth with a dainty hand. "Blessed be the stars. Last eve was real?"

He brushed away a lock of hair covering her eye. "Aye." Kissing her forehead, he inhaled. In an instant he was hard again. "Every passionate moment was real, *mo leannan*."

Snuggling into him, she slid her hand across his chest. He moaned with the tingling her deft fingers brought. "I wish we could remain in this bed forever. I cannot remember ever being so happy."

“Aye, but time will nay stand still. I promised your brother I’d return you to Ardchattan before compline last eve.”

“Surely he will understand,” she said with a wee yawn. “No one could have traveled in that torrential rain.”

Sean twirled strands of her hair around his finger. No matter how much he wanted to lie abed with Gyllis in his arms, he needed to return her to the priory quickly. The weather had been a good excuse to have her spend the night at Dunollie, but to keep her after the weather cleared would be unacceptable. It could lead to the lass’s ruination. As it was, if word of their indiscretion were to become known, Duncan Campbell would be after Sean’s head. “We must make haste to return else there could be a scandal—even if everyone believes you slept in the lady’s chamber. One night due to the weather might be permissible, but if we delay, a scandal will erupt for certain.”

She flopped onto her back. “Ugh. I’ve been imprisoned in that tiny cell for so long, I’d forgotten how wonderful things could be outside.”

“Aye, though you have come so far, you must continue your treatment. Why, you’re so strong, I wouldn’t be surprised to see you make a full recovery.”

She clapped her hands over her face. “I’d be too embarrassed to have anyone other than you see me.”

“Why? You are beautiful.”

“I am a cripple. For some reason, you have chosen to see beyond that, but in society I will be seen as a monster.”

“I don’t think anyone could believe that.”

She chuckled. “Sometimes I wonder if you are not blind. You’ve been to the fetes, people treat cripples like lepers.”

Sean clenched his jaw. “If anyone dare taunt you, they’d have to answer to me.”

She rolled to her side and again draped her arm across his chest. “If only I could stay in this bed forever. Then every night you would return, and one day the witch who cursed me with this illness would be satisfied with my unbounded dedication to you and cure me.”

“You read too many fantastical tales.” He lifted her chin and kissed her lips. “I shall take you back to Ardchattan. I have a duty to perform for my uncle. After things have settled, I will gain an audience with your brother and ask for your hand.”

Gyllis didn’t seem to pay attention to the duty part, for her face beamed. “Do you mean that, Sean? I will become the lady of your keep?”

“I can think of no other woman more perfect for the role.”

The passion in her kiss nearly kept them abed for another hour.

Sean helped Gyllis dismount. She loved how easily he could lift

her. He showed no strain in his face and only set her down when Angus came up with the crutches. He rapped the big knocker on the priory door.

The knocker was so loud up close, Gyllis touched a hand to her ear. “I hope John isn’t angry.”

“I cannot see how he could be. Now, if we’d had Noah’s ark last eve, we might have made it back.

She inclined her lips toward his ear and whispered. “I’m glad we didn’t.”

He winked. “Me as well.”

A monk slid aside the viewing panel. “Miss Gyllis? We were about to send a search party.”

“The burn flooded. There was no way to ferry her back safely,” Sean said.

The monk frowned and ushered Gyllis behind him. “We will see to her safety from here.” Before Sean could say a word, the monk closed the door.

“Pardon me, but that was rather abrupt.” Sean’s voice resounded through the door. “I haven’t even said goodbye.”

The monk slid the panel open. “She bids you good day.”

“I shall see you again soon, Miss Gyllis,” Sean called past the pushy old monk.

“Thank you for your kindness, Sir Sean.”

Gyllis gave the monk a heated look, just to let him know she didn’t appreciate his impertinence. Yes, she had been away longer than Sean had promised, but for good reason. She turned and proceeded through the cloisters. She wouldn’t allow the monk’s sourpuss attitude to diminish her good spirits. She had a semblance of a spring in her step —at least as much as the crutches would allow. Strength radiated through her limbs and she nearly cast the supports aside. Her breast filled with joy, she could not believe her fortune. Last May, she’d gone to the fete seeking to impress Sean MacDougall and had returned home dejected, downtrodden and ill. Only after she’d suffered through the worst of paralysis, had he come to her like a gallant knight and wooed her. Ravished her. And she’d savored every moment in his arms.

Nothing could make Gyllis give up now. She would focus on her treatments more diligently than ever before. Soon she would be walking without assistance. The next time Sean visited Ardchattan, she would be stronger. Every time he would come, she would surprise him with her improvement.

Gyllis leaned on her crutches and opened the door to her cell.

Her smile instantly dropped.

Dressed in black priest’s robes as customary, John faced her,

crossed his arms and frowned. It wasn't his usual frown. His eyes grew dark—almost hateful. "Where the devil have you been for the past day?"

Gyllis's first thought was to cower—beg for forgiveness. Her face burned, but she straightened, refusing to allow her brother to intimidate her. "The burn flooded. It was impossible to return."

He stepped closer. "Where did you stay the night?"

"Sir Sean graciously provided me with a chamber at Dunollie."

"Gracious?" John spread his palms to his sides. "You forget I am quite familiar with Sean MacDougall and his gallant womanizing."

A lump the size of her fist blocked Gyllis's throat. Heat prickled her skin. Did John speak true? Were Sean's actions a ruse to take advantage of a cripple?

No. I will not believe it.

"If he laid a hand on you, the Campbells will not rest until he is brought to justice."

"Nay." She clapped a hand to her chest, trying not to heave. In no way could she be the cause of a clan feud. "You are stretching the truth."

"Me? Lie?" John threw up his hands and paced in a circle. "He has compromised you, has he not?"

Trembling, Gyllis clamped her lips and refused to answer. Sean would ask Duncan for her hand. It had been she who had gone to *his* chamber, not the other way around. If she hadn't heard him practicing and grown curious, her virtue would still be intact. She glared at her brother as hotly as he glared at her.

John grasped her shoulders and shook, his eyes bulging. "I can tell by your reluctance to speak."

"Please, John. Stop." She stamped her foot. "We are to be married."

"MacDougall?" he yelled. "The man's a superb tracker, but he's aligned with the Stewarts. You cannot be serious."

She tightened her grip on her crutches. "I love him."

"You stupid lass." He shoved his hand over the shaven part of his head. "You will spend the rest of this day repenting in your cell. At first light on the morrow, the monks will take you back to Kilchurn."

"No, please." The crutches tapped the floor as she pattered toward him. "I have only started to respond to Brother Wesley's treatment."

He glared with a disdainful scowl. "Your treatment has ended. 'Tis time you return home."

"Will you…?" She couldn't say it, but she knew full well John had the power to ruin her.

He stopped pacing. "I shall pen a missive to Duncan and you'd best pray my ire cools before I touch my quill." He stormed past her and

slammed the door.

As her crutches dropped, Gyllis staggered to the bed and dropped face down. Just when she thought her luck had changed, everything came crashing down and crumbled at her feet.

Silently, Gyllis rode with an escort of guards and monks. John hadn't joined them, nor had he seen her off. Brother Wesley hadn't come to say goodbye either. She felt filthy like a fallen woman—a leper who was too diseased even to be tended by the faithful.

Her own brother had cast her from his priory. What treatment could she expect from her family? *Will they lock me in my chamber? Will they fear me? And what rueful words did John impart in his missive to Duncan?*

When the grey stone curtain walls of Kilchurn Castle loomed ahead, Gyllis's stomach clenched into a tight ball. Upon the battlements, the ram's horn sounded, indicating the Campbell guard had seen them. Mother, Duncan—everyone would now know they were approaching. *Dear Lord, please make everything all right*.

The gate was open and the retinue rode straight through the barbican and into the courtyard. The reins slid in Gyllis's sweaty fingers. From the keep's great doorway, Duncan, Lady Meg, Mother and her sisters all stared at her. Was that fear Gyllis read on their wide-eyed visages?

The lead guard dismounted, drew a missive from his doublet and handed it to Duncan. "This is for you from the prior, m'lord."

Gyllis nearly fell off her horse. If only she could have read its contents first, she'd at least know what to expect. Would Duncan take the strap to her? He was fully within his rights if he chose to do so.

When Duncan slipped the missive into his doublet, she breathed a sigh of relief. She would have died if he'd stood in the courtyard and read it aloud as if it were a proclamation.

Mother pushed past him, followed by the lassies. "Praise the good Lord, Gyllis has returned to us."

Mevan, Mother's most trusted man-at-arms stepped beside her mount and reached up. "Welcome home, Miss Gyllis. Can I assist you?"

"My thanks." She hesitated and searched for the monk bearing her crutches. When she saw he'd already dismounted, she braced her hands on Mevan's shoulders and let the old guard help her down. "How is your wife?" she tried to make conversation as if her world weren't falling apart.

"She is well, thank you."

Gyllis took the crutches from the monk and faced her family. Mother's eyes were red and welled with tears. "At last you have come

home." She pulled her into an embrace.

Mother always smelled of sweet lavender. And her hug was soft and warm and welcoming. Gyllis closed her eyes while her own tears welled.

Perhaps the family would not fear her.

Before she knew it, she was surrounded by her sisters, all chatting and hugging, laughing and crying. Gyllis looked to Meg with Elizabeth in her arms. "You've returned from court?" She grinned at the babe. "My, the bairn has grown so much. I cannot believe it."

Meg beamed, her blue eyes twinkling with the sunlight. "Aye, she's a healthy lass." She inclined her head to the nursemaid behind holding the other redheaded twin. "Colin as well."

"A moment," Duncan boomed.

Gyllis could have fainted. *Has he read John's missive already?*

Mother stood aside. Duncan grasped Gyllis's shoulders and hugged her. "Welcome home, sister."

Her resultant sigh of relief nearly made her swoon. "'Tis good to be amongst you once again. Though the monks did so very much to help me, not a day passed where I didn't miss you."

Mother straightened Gyllis's veil. "I am surprised John sent you back so soon. From his last missive, I assumed you'd remain in his care through autumn."

Gyllis tried not to cringe, though her cheeks burned. "We agreed I could complete the remainder of my training at home," she hedged and looked toward Helen and Meg. "After all, I have three sisters and a sister-in-law who can help." If only she could have read what John had scribed in that missive before she opened her mouth.

Meg grinned. "I think we might try a new treatment when you're ready."

"I for one am happy you're here." Helen placed her hand on Gyllis's shoulder. "I've much to tell you." Helen's expression appeared strained.

Unusual. Something is wrong.

Gyllis arched her brow. "I cannot wait." She moved toward the keep, painfully aware that everyone watched how she managed with her crutches, praying that no one asked how she acquired them.

"Can you climb stairs with those?" Mother asked.

"Aye. I can do almost everything." Gyllis winked at Helen. She seemed to need a lift of spirits. "And I intend to be walking without them soon."

"You mustn't push yourself, dear," Mother said.

Gyllis looked to the sky. If Ma wasn't telling someone what to do, she wouldn't be happy. "It has been a long ride. I'd like to retire to my chamber until the evening meal."

Helen walked beside her. “I’ll escort you.” Her tone was too chipper. Something was afoot for certain.

Together they left the others staring after them.

Gyllis had surmounted the first hurdle. She had no doubt she’d face Duncan later, but for now she and Helen would have an afternoon to themselves. And it seemed they both needed to talk. If there was one person on earth Gyllis could confide in it was she. When they were but young lasses they had made a pact that anything spoken in confidence could never be repeated.

“You move along very well with those,” Helen said as she led Gyllis up the stairwell.

“Sir Sean made them for me,” she whispered.

Helen stopped. “Are you jesting?”

Gyllis inclined her head toward the landing. “I’ll not utter another word until we are behind closed doors.”

“At least you’ve had some fun?” she asked, waggling her brows.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever heard anyone call paralysis fun.”

Helen opened the door. “You ken what I mean.”

Gyllis hobbled into her chamber and sighed. She’d never really appreciated the grandeur of her rooms. Her four-poster bed had yellow drapes embroidered with wildflowers. She’d forgotten how pretty they looked. Heading toward the overstuffed couch in front of the hearth, she inhaled. The chamber smelled of rose oil. A ray of sunlight shone in through the narrow window with a breeze fluttering the yellow canopy above her bed.

She plopped onto the couch and rested her crutches on the floor. “Come. Tell me what is afoot.”

Helen plodded across the floor and sat with a huff. “’Tis not fair.”

“What?”

“Remember when I told you Duncan and Meg went to court whilst you were away?”

“Aye, I was surprised to see them in the courtyard.” Gyllis reclined against the padded backrest, wishing Duncan and Meg were still at court, and would remain there for the next fifty years.

Helen heaved an enormous sigh. “It appears Lady Meg decided it was up to her to play matchmaker.”

Gyllis leaned forward, eyebrows drawn together. “Have you ever mentioned to her your affinity for Eoin MacGregor?”

“Wheesht.” Helen glanced over her shoulder as if someone would burst into the chamber. “Of course not.”

Gyllis cringed. “Oh, dear.”

Helen grasped Gyllis’s hand and squeezed. “Duncan would never allow a MacGregor to marry one of us. He believes them beneath the Campbells.”

“They pay fealty to our clan. That makes them no better or worse.”

“Aye.” Helen again glanced around as if she expected spies in every corner. “Well ’tis too late for any of that now. If you had arrived a sennight hence, you would have missed me altogether.”

“Pardon?”

“In two days Mother will be escorting me to Ardnamurchan where I will marry Sir Aleck MacIain, Seventh Chieftain of Ardnamurchan.”

Gyllis could scarcely swallow. She’d only arrived home and now her dearest, most beloved sister was leaving—not only leaving, but wedding someone Gyllis knew nothing about. “You are to be married?”

“Two days hence.”

“Oh my heavens.” Gyllis couldn’t believe it. Helen could not possibly leave now. Not when she—they both—needed an ally. “H-have you met Sir Aleck?”

“I’ve never seen him. Meg tells me he’s agreeable and Duncan says our marriage will make a necessary alliance with the MacIain Clan.”

“He’s chosen your husband to make an alliance? I ken that’s the way of things but, Helen, ages ago we agreed we’d never settle for an arranged marriage—we shall marry for love.”

Helen coughed out a rueful laugh. “’Tis easy for you to say. If you hadn’t come down with paralysis, it would be *you* heading to Ardnamurchan.”

Gyllis clapped a hand over her mouth. Helen was right, she *would* have been the one to suffer marriage to a complete stranger had she not been away ill. “This cannot be so.”

“Would I jest about something so grave?”

“My God.” Gyllis cringed at her blasphemy and moreover, her failure to be there in support of her sister. “I feel responsible.”

Helen spread her palms and shook her head. “At first I blamed you…but then when I thought about it, I realized I’d rather marry a chieftain, and help the family strengthen relations with the northern clans than be in your predicament. Oh Gyllis, is it so wrong of me to think that way?”

“Of course not.” Her stomach twisted in knots. If only she’d come home sooner. Poor Helen would never have been able to stand up to Duncan with Gyllis away. Gyllis had always been the stalwart spokesperson between them. “Why did you not refuse?”

Wringing her hands, Helen hunched forward. “What should I have done? I am soon to be twenty with no other offers, no other prospects.”

“What of Eoin?”

Helen smirked. “I’ve admired him from the battlements, but now he’s off patrolling the borders or carrying out some other inordinately

important task for Duncan and the king. I'll most likely never see him again."

"I cannot believe this." Gyllis pounded her fist on the couch. "Why are you not fighting?"

"And go against Duncan, Mother, and what is best for the clan?" She clapped her palms to her cheeks. "It is my duty."

The guilt encircling Gyllis's neck couldn't have closed her throat any tighter. She scooted closer and placed her arm around Helen's shoulders. "You are right. It should have been me making this sacrifice."

"Aye." Helen threw up her hands. "And you had to go contract paralysis."

Gyllis bit her bottom lip. Never in her life did she think she'd feel guilty for her ailment. Already twisted inside for her indiscretions with Sir Sean, the wretched lump in her throat returned. "I suppose I did."

"If 'tis Sean MacDougall you want, he'd best propose soon, else you'll be wed to some old chieftain aiming to make a Campbell alliance."

Gyllis slid her arm from Helen's shoulder. Given her sister's sacrifice, she couldn't allow her happiness to bubble over.

She must have looked shamefaced because Helen knit her brows. "I thought you'd sworn off Sir Sean after his deplorable actions at Beltane."

Gyllis couldn't meet her sister's gaze. She stared at her hands. "I did, until I learned the reason for his disappearance. His father died that day. 'Twas the healer who embraced him after she and her husband told Sir Sean the news."

"How awful." Helen leaned closer. "And then he visited you at the priory?"

"Aye." Gyllis would not admit to anything else.

"Oh no, you're not pursing your lips. Sir Sean gave you the crutches? How often did he visit you?"

Gyllis clapped her hand over her mouth to hide her grin, but Helen pulled it away. "Very well…" She divulged all except the night she'd spent at Dunollie. She'd speak of that to no one.

Helen pressed her fingers to her lips and smiled. "If anyone deserves to be happy after all you've endured, 'tis you." She held up a finger. "However, I meant what I said. Sean had best have a serious conversation with Duncan, and soon."

Gyllis wouldn't let on how much the butterflies flitted around her stomach. Two things worried her…How long would it be before Sean discovered she'd returned home? And what was written in that meddlesome missive from John?

Chapter Eighteen

Alan MacCoul lunged, thrusting his sword. Missing his mark, he threw his head back and cackled. If his sparring partner hadn't been fast, he'd be dead. Though Alan needed well-trained men, poor fighters would be culled. He advanced on the sentry, hacking his two-handed blade left and right, giving no quarter. Wearing his partner down renewed his strength. Lust for blood pulsed through his veins, the stench of fear bled through his sparring partner's pores.

"M'lord." The booming voice behind him registered, but Alan didn't stop.

His opponent tripped and fell on his backside. Alan pounced, pointing his blade against the coward's neck.

The man held up his hands then pointed. "Y-you'd best turn around m'lord."

If this was a trick to draw attention away, he'd skewer the miserable sop.

"M'lord," the gravelly voice behind came again.

"This had better be good." Alan looked over his shoulder and grinned.

Brus dragged a prisoner into the clearing, leading him by a rope tied around his wrists. The man's face was purple and swollen. Blood streamed from his nose, and from the red soaked into his shirt, his nose wasn't the only thing that had been bleeding. Even though the prisoner looked like shite, Alan still recognized him.

Fraser.

Before he turned completely away, Alan grazed his blade up his sparring partner's cheek, opening up a stream of blood. "Learn to fight before you spar with me again, else it will be your last match." He smirked at Brus. "Where'd you find this pox-ridden whoreson?"

"Spying for MacDougall—looking for us. His two accomplices are already dead." Brus tugged the bastard forward. "But I thought you might want a word with this one before I ran him through."

Alan examined his prisoner with an evil chuckle. Snot ran from Fraser's bloodied and broken nose. Brus hadn't been kind. From the dirt and grass covering his body, he'd not only been beaten, he'd been dragged. One eye was swollen shut and a cut at his temple still streamed red. "You've shown him our hospitality, I see."

Fraser spat, hitting Alan in the chest.

Clenching his fist tight around the hilt of his sword, Alan thumped him in the jaw. "You always were a sniveling maggot."

Blood trickled from the corner of the miserable wretch's mouth.

"Did Sean send you?"

Fraser spat blood on the ground this time. “I kent you were causing the mischief at Dunollie. Why must you always be a bastard?”

“I’m asking the questions. If you hadn’t noticed, your life is mine to take.” Alan recoiled and slammed his fist into Fraser’s gut.

With a grunt, the Dunollie guard doubled over, his spittle spraying the dirt.

“I’m the lord and master here. You are but a rodent caught in my snare.”

The rat had the nerve to glance about. “It looks as if you’re preparing for war,” he growled through clenched teeth.

Alan threw back his head and roared with laughter. “My force is rather large. Perhaps I’ll take the crown.”

“You’re mad.”

“I’m a man looking to claim my rightful place. I’ve been ignored and shunned all my life and I’m weary of it. I’ve no choice but to take that which should have gone to me.”

Blood oozed from the corner of the prisoner’s mouth and his head hung forward. “What the devil are you raving about?”

Alan sauntered up to him and pulled his head up by the hair. “You’ll not be around to find out.” Gnashing his teeth, Alan sliced his blade across Fraser’s exposed jugular and watched the errant guard drop to his knees as his lifeblood drained into the ground.

MacCoul leered at Brus. “Deliver the body to Dunollie. I’m sure young Sean will be worried about his spy.”

“Straight away,” Brus sniffed. “I’ll leave at dawn.”

Alan glanced at the sky. It was afternoon, but he supposed it didn’t matter if his man-at-arms left on the morrow. After all, Fraser was dead. He’d just smell that much worse when he arrived at the castle.

Alan’s messenger rode into the clearing. “A missive, m’lord.”

He marched over and snatched the parchment from his hand. *The Lord of Lorn’s seal, addressed to that sniveling maggot, MacDougall*. “Where did you find this?”

“Intercepted it from Lorn’s runner.”

“What did you do with the body?”

The man threw his thumb over his shoulder. “He’s at the bottom of Loch Etive with a rock in his belly.”

Alan grinned. “Good man. Help yourself to an extra ration of whisky.”

“Thank you, m’lord.”

Brus stepped in. “What does it say?”

Alan ran his finger under the red wax seal and read, a wicked smile spreading across his face. “’Tis the invitation we’ve been waiting for.”

Sitting in his solar, Sean poured over the ledgers now kept by his new factor, a cleric. If he couldn't trust a holy man to keep accurate accounts, there'd be no hope. Fortunately, thus far the man had proved to be precise.

To be honest, Sean was happy to have found a competent factor. Recently he'd had some difficulty concentrating. He hadn't been pleased with the way he'd been forced to leave Gyllis at the priory gates. The monks had never kept the doors closed to him before. At his earliest opportunity he'd make a trip to Ardchattan and ensure John hadn't made errant assumptions due to Gyllis's absence. A rational man would understand there had been no choice.

Sean cradled his head in his hand. He'd lived up to his philandering reputation for certain. Any errant assumptions John may have made would have been spot on.

Though thoughts of the lovely lass consumed his mind, he should have waited until they were wed. God, had he no self-control whatsoever? He loved her—kept her on a pedestal. In his eyes, she was an angel, a goddess to be worshiped. Blast his MacDougall hot blood. The moniker "Lusty Laddie" had been well-earned and had plagued him for years.

He chuckled to think he'd been hooked by Duncan's sister. Duncan was the very man who'd given him the label, but truth be told, nary a lass in Scotland matched Gyllis's beauty.

When the ram's horn sounded, Sean's gut clenched. An internal warning made the hairs on his arms stand on end.

It wasn't unusual to receive a visitor. But it was odd for him to be uneasy about it. He'd also earned the nickname of "Ghost" from his service in the Highland Enforcers. He'd developed a perceptive ability rare to most men, a sensation honed by years of knighthood.

Moving with the speed of a cat, he fastened the top button of his quilted doublet and pulled his heavy hauberk over his head. He would not be stepping into the courtyard without the protection of chainmail or his arms. After buckling his sword belt in place and testing the daggers in his sleeves, he headed out.

Angus met him at the keep's doors. At the far side of the courtyard, the portcullis creaked as the gate rose with its blackened iron fangs pointing downward.

Sean squinted through the dank guardhouse. "Who is it?"

"Not sure," Angus said.

A lone horse galloped through the gate. Eric, the stable hand raced in with his palms held high. "Easy boy."

Sean's heart lurched.

A body draped across the steed's back. Blinking, Sean recognized the horse, the tack, and the backside of the rider. Revulsion was the

only word to describe the icy tension clamping every muscle in his body. Bile bit the back of his throat with an acrid burn.

War had been declared, a line drawn.

"My God. 'Tis Fraser." Angus unsheathed his dirk.

The lad brought the horse under control and led him to Sean. He pointed to the dead man. "His throat's been cut."

"MacCoul," Sean growled through clenched teeth.

Angus pointed. "What's this?" He snatched a note secured in Fraser's belt and handed it to Sean. "Addressed to you, m'laird."

"It's been opened." He slid his finger under the compromised wax. "Lorn's seal."

Angus leaned in and studied the crumpled velum. "The bloody bastard."

Sean arched his eyebrow while his gut twisted. "I thought you had a soft spot for him."

A shadow crossed the old man's face. "Not on your life."

A twinge of relief clicked at the back of Sean's mind. He'd been keeping his henchman at arms-length. Not doubting his loyalty to the clan, but questioning his affinity for MacCoul. Something wasn't right when it came to that sniveling maggot and Fraser's death marked the last severed thread. If MacCoul wanted a feud, he'd just purchased one. His friend would be avenged.

Sean eyed Eric. "Take Fraser's body to the priest. He'll ken what to do." Then he flicked open the note and read. "God's bones. Lorn's wedding is only two weeks away—set for the feast of Michaelmas."

"And our enemies know about it," Angus said.

"Aye." Sean folded the missive. "Word was MacCoul's been in the Lowlands training an army."

"Jesus Christ." Angus pressed the heels of his hands to his temples. "Alan isn't daft enough to attack the Lord of Lorn. 'Tis you he's insanely jealous of."

Sean agreed, but that didn't mean Alan wouldn't stage something rash—especially a demonstration to make Sean look bad. He cast his gaze to the MacDougall guard, who were watching him from the battlements above. The men would be riled by Fraser's death and looking for blood. The MacDougalls were good fighting men, but against an army? He needed to call in some overdue favors. "You must ride to Glen Strae with a missive for Eoin MacGregor. I'll head to Glen Orchy straight away and solicit help from Lord Duncan."

Angus gaped. "Campbell? But he's aligned with Argyll—Stewart's enemy—the reason Lorn is proceeding with this marriage is so Argyll cannot claim the title for himself."

"Aye, and he's my closest friend. Given the gravity of MacCoul's message, Duncan will stand beside me. I have no doubt." Sean

marched toward the keep. “Come, I’ve a missive to pen.”

Lady Meg was anxious to try her new treatment for Gyllis and presently her chamber was half full of chambermaids and buckets of hot water. Gyllis stood with crutches under her arms and her shift knotted up over her thighs while the lasses wrapped warm cloths around her legs.

“Word came all the way from France that warm wraps assist in speeding the recovery of paralysis,” Meg said, standing as tall as she could, looking pleased with herself. Her bright-red, curly locks stuck out from under her veil in every direction as if she’d been boiling water in the kitchen for hours.

Gyllis sighed, wondering where on earth Meg gained information all the way from France. *A wives’ tale, most likely*. “I suppose I’ll try anything if it helps.” *And return me to Sir Sean MacDougall’s arms sooner*. She needed to find a way to send a message to Sean and advise him that she’d returned home. Not only was it improper for an unwed lassie to send a missive to a man, it bore too much of a risk. If Duncan received word of it, she’d doubtless be locked in her chamber for life.

Meg moved in front of Gyllis and held her hands firmly. “Lassies, pull the crutches from under her arms.”

Afraid she’d fall, Gyllis clamped her fingers around Meg’s wrists. “I need those.”

“Do as I say,” Meg said in an authoritative voice—rather pushy for such a petite woman. She gave Gyllis a stern look. “Were the warm cloths stimulating?”

Gyllis flexed her muscles. “Aye. I think mayhap they were.”

“Good, then take a step toward me.”

She did as told, then took another while Meg slowly backed away. After they’d crossed the floor, Meg pulled her around. “Now do it without holding my hands.”

Gyllis held fast to her grip. “Oh no, more than a couple of steps and I’ll fall for certain. I always do.”

Meg gave her a stern look that meant she wouldn’t be accepting no for an answer. “I’ll keep my hands out for you. Grasp them at your first weakness.”

Gyllis took two unsteady steps and gasped. She’d nearly fallen—but she hadn’t. *Oh blessed be the saints.*

“Again,” Meg said with the most reassuring smile Gyllis had ever seen.

Concentrating very hard, she took another step, followed by another. Gyllis laughed. “My knees are scarcely wobbling.”

Meg backed further. “Try again.”

Gyllis stepped forward. Her knee buckled and she listed to the side.

Meg clamped onto her shoulders. “Easy lass. You’ve done well.” She turned her attention to the line of chambermaids. “From now on we shall include warm compresses to Miss Gyllis’s treatments of massage.”

Gyllis could have jumped for joy. “I shall be walking again in no time.” *And Sean will be so happy*.

“’Tis what I like to hear.” Her sister-in-law patted her cheek. “If you keep telling yourself you can, you *will*. Only the naysayer lies abed and allows herself to waste away.”

“Did you have this many monks tending you at Ardchattan?” Duncan’s deep voice resounded from the doorway.

A chambermaid slid the crutches under Gyllis’s arms as she shot a shocked glance at her brother. He rarely ever paid a visit to her chamber. “Not by half.”

Duncan clapped his hands. “Leave us. I need a word with my sister.”

Gyllis watched the lassies file out of her chamber and wished she could follow them. John’s missive had caught up to her for certain.

Meg brushed his arm as she walked past. “I shall be in the nursery with Elizabeth and Colin should you need me.” Duncan grinned with a daft look on his face—one he only affected when Lady Meg was present.

After the door closed, Duncan gestured to the couch. “Let us sit.”

Gyllis’s legs were noticeably stronger as she moved and took a seat. She leaned her crutches against the table and bit down on her lip to calm her nerves. “How have things been at Kilchurn whilst I’ve been away?” Her high-pitched voice had a tremor. She clenched her fists until her fingernails bit into her palms. Whatever was coming, showing nervousness to Duncan would make him all the more suspicious.

“John advised you were recovering well and that the priory can no longer handle you.” He took a seat beside her and leaned over, eyebrows slanted inward—definitely not a happy stare. “What the devil did he mean by that?”

“Ah…” Gyllis stared at her hands, her entire body growing hot as a boiling pot. *Stop it Gyllis. He mentioned nothing about Sean. Surely Duncan would have brought him up first had John revealed the night at Dunollie*. “Ah…I-I believe one of the monks became infatuated with me.” It was the best she could do on the spur of the moment.

Duncan sprang to his feet and slammed his fist against the backrest. “I knew it. Did he touch you?” He pounded his fist again. “I’ll kill the bastard. Tell me his name and I’ll see to it he never again looks at another lass.”

Gyllis waved her hands across her body in rapid succession.

“Please no. ’Twas an innocent fascination. He did nothing untoward.”

“No?” Duncan paced. “Then why did John send you home—using a pair of pegs no less?”

“They’re crutches and they help me move around quite nicely.” Seizing the opportunity to steer the conversation away from her indiscretion, Gyllis pointed to the buckets. “Besides, your wife found a new treatment the monks hadn’t used. Already this morning I took seven steps on my own.”

Duncan sat again and frowned.

“After today’s treatment, I have no doubt I’ll be walking again soon.” She clapped a hand over her heart. “I give you my vow I’ll not become a burden to the family.”

“Ah, Gyllis.” He draped an arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. “Is that what you think? You’ll be a burden?” He snorted. “You’re kin. Even if you’d remained bedridden I’d have taken care of you. You ken that do you not?”

“Aye.” Yet another tear stung her eye. She’d honestly believed Duncan would send her to a nunnery if she didn’t recover. “Thank you.” She allowed herself to exhale. Thank God for John. He hadn’t betrayed her confidence after all. She owed him a debt of gratitude.

Now to focus all her energy on her recovery—and finding a way to see Sir Sean as soon as possible.

Chapter Nineteen

Sean followed the sentry into the keep. How odd to be escorted. He practically knew Kilchurn Castle better than he did Dunollie. God knew he'd spent more time there. The irony was the woman he couldn't clear from his thoughts was elsewhere. Though Fraser's death and the blatant message he'd received from MacCoul weighed heavily on his conscience, he couldn't ride to Kilchurn without thinking of Gyllis.

He'd decided to keep his intentions to marry the lass quiet for now. First he needed to see Lorn wed, and deal with MacCoul before he approached Duncan for her hand. *I should have hanged the bastard when I had him in my grasp. If it hadn't been the day of my father's funeral, I never would have allowed Angus to step in. And now look. My failure has caused the death of one of my closest friends*.

The guard knocked on the door to Duncan's solar—a place where Sean had spent many hours debating Highland Enforcers' affairs. Though he didn't realize it at the time, life had been far simpler before he'd inherited his father's mantle.

"Sir Sean MacDougall of Dunollie," the guard announced, as if Sean needed an introduction.

Duncan shoved his chair back with a grin. He marched forward and clasped Sean at the elbow and held firm—a more personal greeting than a handshake—the one used by the enforcers. "By God, 'tis good to see you."

Sean couldn't bring himself to smile. "You as well."

"Too much time has passed." Duncan gestured to a seat. "Are you ready to rejoin the enforcers? Tension with England is mounting."

"I wish I were." He sat and leaned back with his knees wide. "Being Chieftain of Dunollie has brought on a host of problems."

Duncan moved to the sideboard and pulled the stopper out of a flagon. "I'd agree there. I never had an appreciation for my father's responsibilities until I stepped into his shoes." He set a cup in front of Sean and raised the one remaining in his hand. "Let us toast to our clans as well as long health."

Sean held up his whisky. "*Slàinte*." He sipped and swilled the oaken flavor across his tongue. One thing was always a certainty when he visited Kilchurn. There was no finer whisky in all of Scotland than that from Campbell's still.

Duncan took his seat at the head of the table. "So, if you're not itching to head back to the borders, what brings you to Kilchurn?"

Sean watched the whisky while he swirled it in his cup. He needed to choose his words carefully, else he'd come across as an incompetent

boob. “I’ve some grave news…”

Looking Duncan square in the eye, he leaned forward on his elbow and started with Alan MacCoul’s banishment from Dunollie lands, the cattle thieving, Fraser’s mission and the return of his body—and the missive. “…now I’ve nay choice but to provide fealty service for Lorn’s wedding.”

Duncan thoughtfully rotated the cup in his fingers. “You’re worried about a wedding?”

Sean tossed back the last of his whisky. “The last thing Fraser said was the whore told him MacCoul was amassing an army.”

Duncan chuckled. “A bedraggled crew, no doubt. It sounds like a gang of renegades. They’d be no match for your trained men.”

Sean wished he were as confident as his friend. “I’m not so certain. I think they’re organized.”

“What kind of men would follow a festering pustule like Alan MacCoul? What means has he?”

“I know not. But my father had an affinity for the bastard.”

“Well, you’ve put a damper on your da’s former misguided affections.” Duncan rested his elbows on the table. “My bet is he’ll be a thorn in your side until you lure him back to MacDougall land and arrest him—string him up like you should have done after he attacked you. Christ, he challenged you right after you were declared chieftain?”

“Aye, I ken what I *should* have done. But now I cannot take a chance on him causing mischief for the Lord of Lorn.” Sean sat taller. “I need your help, Duncan.”

“’Tis a wedding, no?” The Lord of Glenorchy smirked.

“Aye, at Dunstaffnage Chapel.”

“MacCoul would be an idiot to attack you on the king’s lands. Besides, you’ll have your army as well as Lorn’s. Surely you can handle a wee skirmish.”

“But I won’t have the stealth of the enforcers. I want to establish an impenetrable barrier for my uncle.”

Duncan sat back and spread his arms to his sides. “’Tis a wedding for Christ’s sake. Worse, it’s John Stewart, Lord of Lorn’s wedding. If I’m there and something does happen, the Stewart Clan will be blaming me.”

God, the man made Sean’s worries sound daft. But Sean persisted, “You ken I’d vouch for you.”

“Aye, after the dust settles.”

“What about sending in a dozen of your best men? They can wear my colors.”

“All but a handful are on the borders. Wouldn’t get them back here in time.” Duncan shook his head. “Nay, I’d be daft to call them away

from the king's business to stand watch during a wedding."

Sean bit the inside of his cheek. "Bloody hell, Duncan. You're the closest thing to a brother I have."

The lord tapped his finger against his cup. "I ken."

"Can you not put aside your fealty for Argyll for a wedding and provide some weapons?"

"That's just it." He ground his finger into the board. "'Tis a miserable wedding—hardly something we need an army for. Christ, man, you've at least fifty skilled men in Dunollie's guard. In my opinion, you are overreacting to Fraser's death. He rode into the wrong camp is all. You know that as well as I."

Sean groaned. "When you say it like that, I feel the fool for having traveled so far to gain your audience."

"Not at all. I'm always glad to share a tot with you." Duncan stood and grabbed the flagon from the sideboard. "If you have more trouble with MacCoul's thugs thieving your cattle, the enforcers will be able to help you. That's our motto—to support the king and maintain order."

Sean watched him fill his cup with another shot of whisky. Had he overreacted? What would his father have done in his stead? He puzzled. The MacDougalls always had their enemies, but Duncan was right. The Dunollie guard posed a force to be reckoned with. Had Sean lost confidence because of his lack of trust? Angus had proved his loyalty. So had the others for the most part. Even Gawen had proved his loyalty when he kicked the stools at the hanging. It was time for Sean to cast his misgivings aside and lean on his own men for support. Besides, Angus might have better luck soliciting help from Eoin MacGregor.

Sean raised his cup. "I hope I do not have to take you up on that offer. I intend to squash MacCoul the first time he shows his beastly face."

Duncan grinned. Sean hadn't noticed it before, but the Lord of Glenorchy's smile was dimpled like Gyllis's. He sipped the fiery liquid. If Duncan had any idea how often he'd seen Gyllis in the past few months, he'd run him out of Argyllshire. *I'd best stick with my plan and leave the topic of marriage alone this trip. Duncan is likely to blow hot steam through his ears—just like old times*.

Duncan shoved his chair back. "Of course you'll stay for the evening meal—head back on the morrow?"

"I will, thank you. 'Tis a long ride."

"Mayhap we can get in a sparring session afore the meal is served."

Sean swirled his fingers over the basket-weave pattern on his sword's hilt. "I'd welcome a healthy round. No one's given me a good run since you left me on the borders."

Duncan clapped him on the shoulder. "'Tis time you groomed a champion. A chieftain should not be the best sword—'tis not healthy for the longevity of the clan."

"Oh?" Sean scoffed. "And why have I not seen any Campbell guard best you?"

The Lord of Glenorchy winked. "I'm working on it."

Gyllis sat in the embrasure of her window and stared out over Loch Awe. September was always her favorite month. The warmth of summer lingered, though something in the air warned the nice weather wouldn't last. It made her anxious to enjoy it all the more. This season it also made her anxious to shed her crutches. She'd been suffering paralysis for so long, she yearned for the days without constant care, when she was free to run and dance.

The chamber door opened and Helen stepped inside carrying a missive. "Have you a moment?"

"Meg and her retinue of lasses have come and gone." Gyllis beckoned her. "What is that?"

Helen skipped over and sat on the padded bench opposite. "I've received a letter from Sir Aleck MacIain."

"Honestly?" Hopefully this was a pleasant surprise. Gyllis waggled her eyebrows. "What does it say?"

"He wrote me a poem and said some nice things."

Gyllis rolled her hand. "I'm sure you didn't come in here to talk about the lovely weather we're having. Read it to me."

Gyllis listened to the love letter. The chieftain's prose put Helen on a pedestal, reassuring her that all would be well, reinforcing she was needed as the lady of the keep in Ardnamurchan posthaste, and Aleck awaited her arrival with fond anticipation. He even signed it "your servant". When Helen finished reading, she folded the velum and stared at it with a long sigh.

"He sounds very nice."

She nodded her dun locks and pursed her delicate mouth. Gyllis had always considered Helen a bit frailer. Though now stricken with paralysis, Gyllis figured the tides may have changed in that regard. In so many ways over the past months, Gyllis had doubted herself, feared she would be a burden and hated every moment of her dependence.

But her sister needed reassurance now more than Gyllis did. "Surely, Sir Aleck's letter has eased your mind."

"Aye." Helen looked up and smiled—a sad smile all the same. "I believe he has a good heart at least."

Gyllis leaned forward and patted her hand. "'Tis a start."

Her sister stood and moved to the window, gazing out over the loch. "I shall miss this place."

Gyllis scooted along the bench and grasped her hand. “And I shall miss you.”

“I’m ever so anxious.” She glanced at the crutches. “Would you be up to a stroll?”

“Aye—let us venture to the battlements.”

Helen’s gaze dropped to Gyllis’s legs. “Are you able to climb that many steps?”

“I will not know until I try.” She slid back and plucked her crutches from the floor. “I nearly made it across the chamber without these today.”

“That is wonderful news, but I’m not certain you should be climbing all the way to the battlements. What if you fall?”

The more Helen balked, the more Gyllis wanted to cast the blasted crutches aside and race her to the top of the stairwell. *If only I could.* Mayhap they’d be able to race the next time they were together. “Come. If I fall, I’ll have a wee bruise. If ’tis too far, we shall turn around.”

Helen giggled. “I suppose I could always ask a young guard to carry you back to your chamber.”

Gyllis pulled herself to a stand and started toward the door. “Now that’s the best idea you’ve had in ages.”

“I thought you were head over heels for Sir Sean.”

“I am. But I’m not dead.”

Helen followed her into the passageway. “You’re still incorrigible.”

“And you are still a prude.”

Giggling, they made their way up through the narrow stone stairwell winding like a spiral to the wall-walk. At the top, Gyllis leaned against the stone battlements to catch her breath. “I cannot believe I used to run up those stairs.”

Helen fanned her face. “I cannot believe you’ve suffered paralysis and climbed all the way up here with a set of crutches. You are truly amazing.”

Gyllis chuckled and took in a deep breath. The deep blue water shimmering on the loch caught her eye. She could see for miles. Even the purple heather on the surrounding hills was in bloom. Violets and lavenders climbed for miles up the slopes of Ben Cruachan, the sight was enough to take her breath away. A breeze caressed her face and summer’s fragrance filled her with renewed energy. “This view made our effort worthwhile.”

Behind them iron clanged. Gyllis snapped her head around and headed across the stone walk to a crenel notch. “Remember when we used to watch Eoin and Sean spar from this very spot?” She poked her head through the gap. Only two men sparred in the courtyard. She instantly made out her brother, but her heart leapt when she

recognized the man with his back to her. Only one man on earth could make her heart stutter an arrhythmic beat—make her knees turn into boneless limbs, and most of all, heat pool in the most sacred place of all.

Tall, wavy, dark hair brushing his nape, built like a prized bull from his broad shoulders to his sturdy hips. “Sean,” Gyllis whispered.

“Oh, my.” Helen pushed in beside her. “Do you know why he’s here?”

She gaped at him. “I haven’t a clue.”

Helen fanned her face. “But he is.”

Gyllis sighed. “Aye.” Her body went from trembling recognition to floating. Her mind drifted to the night she’d seen him sparring with an imaginary partner completely nude. Sean moved like a cat. His movements so fast, his sword and limbs blurred. His lunges deep, his spins precise, calculated. Duncan kept up, but her brother could hardly match the younger chieftain.

She could watch Sean forever, her mind’s eye picturing the bulging muscles beneath his linen shirt. The men circled. She could see Sean’s face now. His hawk-like eyes focused on Duncan as if nothing around them could draw his attention away. With the laces of his shirt spread open, his chest glistened with perspiration. Even from five-stories up, Gyllis could see the sheen, and all too well she was familiar with the bands of sinew taut beneath.

Heat spread throughout her body. Her breasts swelled against her stays. From such distance she could smell his spicy musk soaring up to her with the breeze, as if begging her to float down to his arms. Her lips parted with her stuttered breaths.

“Och aye, you are smitten.” Helen nudged her. “You should see your face.”

Gyllis clapped her hands to her cheeks. “’Tis that obvious?”

Helen laughed. “You may as well hold up a placard that says ‘marry me’.”

“Oh please, how utterly unheard of.” Gyllis straightened, though she couldn’t bring herself to pull her gaze from the Adonis down below.

“Come, I ken what we should do.” Helen hastened toward the stairwell.

Gyllis hobbled after her as fast as she could, her blasted crutches clicking the flagstone.

“What are you on about?”

The dun-haired lass had never looked like she was up to so much mischief as she did when she stopped at the entrance to the stairwell and grinned. “We’ve not much time to make you look as bonny as a queen.”

Gyllis's insides flipped upside down. "I think the idea of matrimony becomes you. You're not half as dull as you were when we rode onto the Dunstaffnage foregrounds for Beltane."

Helen slapped her hand through the air. "Hogwash. I'm as passionate as you. I just do not let everyone know about it as you do."

Gyllis tried to keep up with Helen's fast pace. "Honeyed cryspes? You would have rather sought out food than stroll past a gathering of brawny knights."

Helen stopped and faced her. "Ah, but you forget even knighted lads enjoy sweets. Mother doesn't pay a mind to us if we're seeking out a treat, silly. I'm not half as dull as you may think."

Gyllis covered her smirk with the tips of her fingers and snorted out her nose. Evidently her sister was a master at pretenses. Perhaps she should pay more attention in the future.

Chapter Twenty

Standing at the well, Sean splashed his face with water and ran his fingers through his hair, shoving it from his eyes. He didn't have a comb in his kit, so a quick brush with his fingers would have to do. He straightened his sword belt and headed into the keep. He wasn't enamored with the idea of spending the night, but it would be folly to head home in the dark. Not only would he have to travel through Fearnoch Forest, the delivery of Fraser's body broadcast loud and clear that Sean's problems were far from over. Traveling home at first light was his only option.

Once inside the great hall, he strode through the crowd to the dais. Duncan sat in the lord's chair at the center of the table with Lady Meg on his right and his mother, Lady Margaret, on his left. If anyone had entered the keep wondering who was lord and master, there would be nary a question. The trio looked as regal as the king's retinue at court.

Duncan stood. "Sir Sean, please take the seat at the end. I've no doubt my sisters will enjoy your conversation."

Sean gulped. Duncan never wanted him to take a wee gander at his sisters. *Hmm. Perhaps he believed there was no threat with Gyllis away at the priory.*

"How are you Sir Sean?" Lady Meg asked holding out her hand. "It has been ever so long since we've seen you."

"I'm well." Sean strode around the table, took her hand and kissed it. "My dear lady, you are bonnier than ever. And how are the twins?"

"Elizabeth's almost as beautiful as her mother," Duncan said. "And Colin is a lad who would make my father proud."

"Congratulations to you both." Sean then bowed to Lady Margaret. "And how are you m'lady?"

"Very well," the woman who'd been a second mother dipped her head. "Please accept my condolences for the loss of your father. He was a good man."

"That he was."

Sean took his seat, but no sooner had he done so, a hush dampened the banter in the hall. Lady Margaret clapped a hand to her chest and sat forward. Sean followed her gaze.

Gyllis stood at the foot of the stairwell wearing a crimson mantle. Both the over and under gowns were a work of art. Low cut, Gyllis's breasts swelled above the sealskin-trimmed neckline, her flesh more perfect than pure white calla lilies. Her tresses were held away from her face under a matching French hood, also trimmed by sealskin. Looking directly at him, she offered a lovely smile before she handed her crutches to Helen.

She's not?

She did.

With her first step, the gold satin underdress caught the glow of the candlelight and shimmered. Sean scarcely noticed Helen walking closely behind with one hand out. Gyllis grinned at him, her face alive and filled with joy.

She took another step and another.

Sean wanted to dash from the dais and gather her into his arms, but in no way would he wish to detract from her performance.

Duncan stood, as if he'd had the same thought.

Lady Margaret sat transfixed, her hand covering her mouth. "Praise God."

"'Tis a miracle," said Lady Meg.

Sean grasped his armrests. He couldn't allow her to cross the entire hall unassisted, no matter how much she wanted to impress her family. When he slid his chair back, Gyllis stumbled forward. Helen squealed and reached for her, but the lovely lass tumbled beyond her sister's grasp. Benches scraped across the floor as Gyllis collapsed into a heap.

Sean didn't remember his feet touching ground as he dashed to her side. "Miss Gyllis!" He dropped to his knees before her. "Are you all right?"

"Blast." She smacked the floorboards with her fist. "I wanted to impress you, and I had to go and fall on my face like a cripple."

"You are a cripple," Alice said from behind the small gathering of people. Sometimes little sisters could be so maddening.

"No. She is not." Sean gathered her in his arms. "Miss Gyllis may have suffered from a bout of paralysis, but I've never seen anyone with more courage and determination."

Frail and light in his arms, he stood with ease.

She buried her face in his chest and a tear moistened his shirt. "I'm so embarrassed. I wanted to show you how much I've improved."

"Are you jesting? You *walked*, Gyllis. You practically strode across the entire hall without a lick of help. I've never been so impressed by anything in my life as much as I witnessed in that moment. I know how hard you've worked. You are truly amazing."

She met his gaze with a joyous bleary-eyed smile adorned by delightful dimples—so much more enchanting than Duncan's. "Lady Meg started applying warm compresses. I think they've helped a great deal."

"Aye? I'd wager your pure determination has done as much or more than a handful of warm rags." He proceeded to the dais, met with Duncan's angry glare. But before Sean neared close enough for the baron to hear, he pressed his lips to Gyllis's ear. "You've never

looked as radiant as you do this night."

Why she was there and not at the priory he'd uncover later.

Duncan planted his fists on his hips. "Was it necessary to carry my sister all the way to the dais?"

If Sean weren't cradling Gyllis in his arms he'd challenge Duncan on the spot, friend or no. She'd had the courage to attempt to cross the entire great hall unassisted and when her frail legs had given out, the bastard hadn't rushed to her aid. "I believe it was. Only a few sennights ago, Miss Gyllis had just started to walk with crutches."

Duncan crossed his arms and tipped his chin up. "It seems you know an awful lot about my sister's ailment."

Sean pushed past him and climbed onto the dais. "I've had dealings at Ardchattan and chanced to visit with Miss Gyllis a time or two." He set her on the chair beside his. "Are you all right now my… lo…ah…Miss Gyllis?"

"I am, thanks to you, sir." She cast a heated stare in her brother's direction.

Sean took her hand and bowed deeply over it. "'Tis my pleasure to be of assistance." Her lithe fingers smelled of rose oil and he could have hovered there forever. Watching her eyes, he kissed her hand. "Is there anything further I can do to help?"

Gyllis smiled, her gaze trailing down the length of his body. A bold move for a somewhat innocent maid, but a gesture telling him she desired more than a kiss on her hand. "I would be honored if the gallant knight who rescued me would be so kind as to sit beside me during the meal."

Duncan stepped behind them. "Do not make me challenge you MacDougall. I suggest you take your seat and stop carrying on like a wet-eared lad."

"I thought he was rather chivalrous," Helen said, taking the seat on Gyllis's other side.

"He's being a fair bit too familiar if you ask me," Duncan groused.

"Stop," Mother said. "I find Sir Sean's actions endearing. Besides, you didn't spring across the room and dash to assist your sister. If not you, I can think of no one more suitable. Sean is practically family. Why, the pair has known each other since childhood."

Sean leaned toward Gyllis's ear. "I could talk to him now…um… you know."

She held a finger to her lips. "Nay. Let me speak to Mother first. Perhaps she can build a bridge."

Sean glanced toward Duncan. He'd resumed his seat and poured himself a tankard of ale. Slipping his hand under the table, Sean grasped Gyllis's fingers. "Why are you here? I thought you'd remain at the priory for another month at least."

“John was waiting for me in my cell after you brought me back from Dunollie. He said if I was well enough to stay out all night, I could return home.” Gyllis squeezed his hand tight. “He even guessed that we…”

Sean choked on his ale and froth spewed across the table. “Oh no.”

Gyllis bit her lip and dropped her lids. “He did.”

Sean rubbed the back of his neck and flicked his gaze toward the Lord of Glenorchy. “Duncan isn’t aware.”

Gyllis gave him the most perplexed look. “How did you…?”

“He hasn’t tried to hang me—yet.”

Gyllis muffled her giggle with her free hand. “And you, why are you at Kilchurn?”

Sean couldn’t bring himself to tell her about all the problems with Alan MacCoul. The last thing Gyllis needed right now was to worry about an ornery varlet who would soon be brought to justice. “I had dealings with your brother.”

Her face reddened. “Clearly those dealings did not include me,” she whispered so softly, Sean scarcely caught every word.

“Not yet, my love.” Sean pressed his lips to her ear. “Speak to your mother. Then I will approach Duncan after the Michaelmas feast and the Lord of Lorn’s wedding.”

She picked up a piece of bread and took the tiniest bite. “Only speak to him if you truly want to. I know I’m not—”

Sean tightened his fingers around her hand. “Cease. There is no question of my love or devotion for you.”

Duncan pounded the hilt of his eating knife on the table. “The two of you have had your heads together since you sat down. What is so surreptitious you cannot share it with all the table?”

What was it about Duncan Campbell that brought out Sean’s urge to hit something—namely the arrogant lord’s face. God’s teeth, he’d been friends with Duncan forever, but that didn’t mean he’d take his shite. Gyllis must have sensed Sean’s building ire because she squeezed his arm with surprising strength.

But Sean met the baron’s glare. “If you must know, after seeing Miss Gyllis struggling at the priory, I had my carpenter fashion a pair of crutches for her.” He pointed. “Those she attempted to cross the hall *without* today. She was simply informing me of her progress.” Sean glared back, just as intensely as the Lord of Glenorchy. Duncan may be his senior peer, but Sean was a chieftain. A man to be reckoned with. And he would win the bastard’s favor regardless of any past indiscretions. “I happened to be quite amazed with her attempt to walk the length of the hall. I trust you were equally so.”

Lady Margaret leaned forward, blocking the intense current between the two men, though the matron’s eyes focused on the hand

Gyllis had on Sean's arm. "I could scarcely believe my eyes. It appears Lady Meg's treatments have been overwhelmingly helpful."

Gyllis released her grip and folded her hands in her lap. "Aye. I never would have thought hot compresses could make such a difference to the monk's treatments."

Mother's gaze slipped to Sean. "Perhaps we should have kept you at Kilchurn."

Sean knew Lady Margaret to be a shrewd woman. His exuberant display of concern for Gyllis wouldn't have gone unnoticed. Sean only hoped Gyllis's mother would be an ally when it came time to ask for the lass's hand.

Sean and Duncan had spent too much time swilling whisky in alehouses with buxom wenches when they were lads. Aye, they'd both acted like rogues, but Duncan had changed after he'd met his wife—sworn off alehouse tarts. If only the lord could realize more than one man could do the same. Sean hadn't thought of another woman since…since…*in a bloody long time for certain*.

Sean didn't balk when Lady Meg offered him a bed in a guest chamber above stairs—though he'd intended on bedding down in the stable. The soft mattress did nothing to soothe his unease. He needed this business with Lorn's wedding to be over. Though Duncan's argument made sense—Alan MacCoul's quarrel was with Sean and not with the Lord of Lorn. If the bastard was foolish enough to try an attack, it would be a siege on the fortress of Dunollie, not the wedding party and not a castle being part of the crown's holdings. Sean considered sending a missive to Lorn and asking him to change the date or the venue, but doing so would admit weakness.

Sean closed his eyes and slung his arm over his face. A picture of Gyllis immediately came to mind. She'd been so radiant this eve, he could have swept her into his arms and stole her away like a Viking from ages past. The thought of taking Gyllis to his galley and sailing to a distant shore tempted—but only for a moment. He was a chieftain, by God, and his plan was solid. He'd see out his duty and then Gyllis would be his. Not even Duncan Campbell would be able to stand in his way.

Gyllis was his. They may not have pledged their love before God, but she was his woman—always had been. Duncan would not arrange her marriage to any other. Sean would not stand for it. The idea of her marrying any other man made his blood pulse icily through his veins. Hell, if another man looked at Gyllis he turned into a raving lunatic.

The door opened and quickly closed. Sean sat up, the bedclothes dropping to his waist. Gyllis stood against the door, holding a candle, using only one crutch. She wore a dressing gown belted at the waist.

Staring at him, the whites of her eyes grew enormous.

"Gyllis?" Sean reached for a plaid and circled it around his hips as he slid out of bed. "What are you doing in here?"

She drew in a sharp gasp. "I cannot sleep."

"Nor can I, but 'tis not proper for you to be in my chamber." He tucked the plaid at his hip and hastened across the floor. "You could be ruined." Not to mention Duncan would sever Sean's cods if the lord of the keep found them together.

She handed him the candle then placed her hand on his bare chest. His breath caught at her touch. Heaven help him, he could not resist but a single fingertip's caress. The tingling of flesh on flesh stirred molten fire from his chest all the way through the tip of his cock.

She trailed her finger from his heart to the edge of the plaid with a seductive chuckle. "I am already ruined thanks to you."

Sean had no control over his body's reaction. In the blink of an eye, his cock lengthened and stretched taut against the woolen fabric. "I would never see you ruined."

"Mm, mm." She didn't miss his reaction and ran her fingertips along the inside of the plaid perched precariously on his hips.

He took a step back and grasped her shoulder. "We mustn't."

"Why?" she purred.

He squared his jaw. "I should march straight to Duncan's chamber and ask for your hand."

"I do like that idea, however…" She chuckled like a wanton. "He's most likely making another bairn with Lady Meg."

She stepped closer, again toying with the plaid. Sean stepped away and placed the candle on the table. He needed both hands to control the lassie's advances, no matter how much he wanted her, damn it all.

"When is Lorn's wedding?" she asked.

"A fortnight."

The crutch clicked the floorboards as she moved further into the chamber. "'Tis soon. I shall await your return with great anticipation." Her scent made Sean's knees waver, yet Gyllis moved forward unaware of the spell she'd cast over him. "Mother has always been fond of you—but I shall never understand Duncan. You're his best friend, and yet he cannot bear to see you place a hand upon me." She reached out her finger and stroked it across his lips.

Damn, the wavering of his knees rocketed up his thighs, spread through the ache in his groin, and continued to his chest.

Sean forced himself not to tug her into his arms and devour her. God's bones, Duncan's chamber was directly above theirs. If he heard Gyllis's crutch tap the floorboards, the lord would charge in like a raging bull. Sean swallowed, lightheaded from his growing erection. "'Tis difficult for a man to see his friends take an interest in his sister.

You ken we've talked about it."

"Aye." Gyllis's voice grew husky. "'Tis why mother must make him understand." She grasped the plaid and tugged.

Sean held her wrist. "We mustn't."

She met his gaze with an arched brow, but she released her fingers from the wool. "No one saw me. No one will know."

Helpless to turn her away, Sean followed while Gyllis moved to the foot of the bed, placed her crutch on the floor then grasped the bedpost with one hand. Reaching out with the other, she again closed her fingers around his plaid. Her eyes flashed wide and a sultry laugh spilled from her throat as she pulled off Sean's plaid. His cock bounced out and pointed directly at her. He was harder than an oak broomstick and more aroused than a lad staring at a pair of breasts for the first time. Christ, he needed release.

Gyllis didn't help matters. Her pink tongue slipped to the corner of her mouth as her gaze undulated down his body and stopped at his cock. "I-I've wanted you ever since…" She untied the sash around her waist and let the dressing gown drop to the floor.

God save him, she wore not a stich of clothing. Every shred of self-control fled. His mind consumed with the tantalizing woman before him. Somehow she was even more beautiful now than he'd remembered. The candlelight flickered amber across her skin. Chestnut tresses slid over her shoulder, framing two perfectly formed breasts, tipped by rose.

Sean licked his lips, those delectable rosebuds would be his second stop. In two strides, he wrapped her in his arms and crushed his body against hers. "For all that is holy, you have claimed my soul, my flesh and my mind."

He covered her mouth with his, her minty taste flooding his senses. Claiming her for his own, he forced his tongue inside her mouth. She matched the ferocious swirling of his tongue. No, Gyllis wasn't one to shy away from anything life threw her way. She was strong and wild and seductive, and he loved her to the depths of his core. His cock slid across her stomach and he moaned.

In an act of unbridled trust, she released her hold on the bedpost and clamped her arms around his shoulders. Their mouths joined, she thrust her hips against him. "I want you."

He needed no more encouragement. Sean swept her into his arms and placed her on the bed. His mind consumed with desire, his senses overpowered by her smell, her seductive way she rocked her hips in anticipation of receiving him, and the deft fingers plying the muscles in his back, he was powerless to resist.

He trailed kisses down her neck while kneading her breast. Her soft moan made his seed dribble from the tip of his cock. Christ

almighty, he needed her and soon, else she'd unman him just by the sultry tenor of her voice.

He clamped his mouth over her breast and teased her delectable nipple with the swirling of his tongue. Her body quivered as she arched her back and mewled. "I cannot take much more."

Sean looked into those alluring green eyes and chuckled. "You taste like ambrosia from the Gods."

A slow grin spread across her lips and she tugged on his shoulders. "'Tis my turn to taste you."

"Nay."

She tugged harder. "If you haven't realized it yet, I am seducing you, not the other way around."

God, he loved this woman. Sean slid alongside her and gestured to his body, his muscles as taut as they were after he'd been an hour or more in the sparring ring. "I am at your service m'lady." A groan of desire rumbled from his chest.

She ran her tongue over her teeth, sweeping her gaze down his body. The way she looked at him set his cock on fire. The woman was a lioness in the bedchamber, her innocence and eagerness more arousing than anything he'd ever experienced. She rolled atop him and kissed his cheeks, his forehead, his chin.

Sean grasped her shoulders and tried to claim her mouth, but she held up a finger. "You must allow me to seduce you."

"I fear you already have me in your clutches." His voice came out deep and hoarse. He hardly recognized it. He'd been with countless women, but they all paled to the one in his arms. With but a look she could do unholy, rapturous things to his body. He could think of nothing but Gyllis—how much he wanted her in his bed—how much he wanted his cock inside her right now.

But she slid her mouth downward and covered his nipple. Christ his cock spurted another dribble of seed. It felt so damn good, he wouldn't last long. And then she trailed her kisses lower. Sean clenched his bum cheeks so tight his muscles cramped. When she took him into her mouth, he muffled his gasp by draping his elbow across his mouth. Never in his life would he expect Gyllis to taste him, but by God, he was about to explode for the rush of urgency she built up with every sweep of her tongue.

At the ragged edge, his buttocks burning, shaking with frenzy, he grasped her shoulders and tugged her up. When his fingers found her hips, he raised her high enough to impale her on his erection.

She gaped at him, eyes wide. "I can be on top?"

He stirred himself within her warm core. "Aye, lass. You can and you are."

She followed his lead and together they found a rhythm that sped

with the intensity of their breathing. Their bodies quivered with the strain, thrusting, swirling, mounting the precipice of no return until, all at once, together they reached their peak, clinging to each other with silent screams of ecstasy.

She collapsed atop him, their bodies joined, their souls joined. Neither spoke. Even their breathing matched. With her in his arms he was whole. For the first time in his life he knew what it meant to be a man—not just a warrior or a chieftain, but a man who loved a woman so much it hurt. He wanted a family he could protect and cherish, and Gyllis would be the center of his world.

As she rested in Sean's arms, her breathing took on the slow cadence of sleep. No matter how much Sean wanted her to remain in his arms throughout the night, he couldn't risk being discovered. Not only would it ruin Gyllis, it would validate all Duncan's unfounded misgivings—the reason Sean tried to stop her when she'd first slipped into his chamber. The moniker "Lusty Laddie" rang in his head.

"I must take you back."

"Must you?" Gyllis rose up on her elbow. "Why not take me to Kilbride Church and marry me this night?"

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "Because I want to do this right."

Chapter Twenty-One

"If you don't stop smiling, Mother and Duncan will suspect you're hiding something," Helen said while she placed her looking glass in the trunk between the folds of her clothing. She closed the lid. "You'd best pay heed to me. Ever since Sir Sean arrived, you've been flitting around as if you've been touched in the head by a fairy."

Gyllis reached in and fastened the hasp. "Perhaps I have."

"You are hopeless." Helen gave her a prying stare. "It makes me suspect he may have spirted you to the garden and stolen a kiss."

"My lips are sealed." Though she tried, Gyllis couldn't stifle her giggle and it blew through her nose. "Though I must admit, he is very good at kissing." She could never tell Helen what had transpired—heaven strike her dead, she'd actually gone to Sean's chamber and seduced *him*. She hadn't ceased spinning her rosary around in her pocket, reciting Hail Mary's at all hours—while throwing in praises of thanksgiving every now and again.

Helen placed her hand on Gyllis's arm. "I'm happy for you, but tell me, when is he planning to speak to Duncan?"

"As soon as the marriage business is finished with the Lord of Lorn, and after Mother returns from your wedding. I need Ma's support if Duncan launches into one of his rages."

Helen rubbed her palms together. "I could mention something to Ma on the journey to Ardnamurchan. At least it will give us something interesting to talk about."

Gyllis thought for a moment. She hadn't said anything to Mother about Sean because she couldn't decide how to broach the subject. But if Helen planted a seed, it might make her task all the easier. "Perhaps if you mention that Sir Sean gave me the crutches and paid a visit or two to Ardchattan during my confinement."

"Exactly my thoughts, too. Besides Mother isn't blind. She knows you admire him."

Gyllis cringed. "She just doesn't know how much."

A rap came at the door and in walked two groomsmen. "We're here to take your trunks to the wagon. Are you ready, Miss Helen?"

Her poor sister turned as white as bed linen. She cast a worried glance at Gyllis then gestured to her things. "I'm all packed. I shall be down in a moment."

The sisters stood and watched the men haul away the first trunk while Gyllis couldn't stop thinking it should be she who was traveling west to meet and marry a strange man. Her throat grew thick and her palms moist. "I wish you didn't have to go," she whispered.

Helen straightened. "It will be fine. 'Tis time for me to marry and

Mother will be there to ensure all progresses well."

The remnants of Gyllis's euphoria sank to the bottom of her toes. "You will write as soon as you are able?"

"Of course, and you will send word when your wedding date is announced?"

"I will." She forced a smile. "And I'll expect you to be there."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"'Tis settled then." Gyllis tried to hold in her tears, but one dribbled from her eye anyway. She tugged Helen into an embrace. "Hug me now whilst no one can see me weep."

Her sister's body shuddered as a woeful wail burst through her lips. "I…I…"

Gyllis couldn't hold it in. She patted Helen's back and tried to regain control. "Everything will be all right."

With a stuttered inhale, Helen clung tighter.

"A wedding is a happy occasion and you shall be lady of the keep, just as you've always wished."

Helen pulled away, her eyes and nose red. She drew in a staccato breath and nodded while she dabbed her face with a kerchief. "I'd best be off before my tears set the bed afloat."

Gyllis also dried her eyes. "Come. I'll see you off."

Sean had no opportunity to visit Gyllis again before the day of Lorn's wedding arrived. Earlier that morning, he and his men, reinforced by a dozen MacGregors, fanned out through the forest surrounding Dunstaffnage Chapel and found nothing out of place. Things were also quiet in the village surrounding the castle.

The locals had a healthy respect for the Lord of Lorn. As the king's emissary, he provided them with land to till or graze.

The boats moored in Loch Etive were all owned either by local fishermen, or were part of Lorn's retinue, having sailed down from Lorn's Castle Stalker to the north. Angus reported no sign of Alan MacCoul or any of the foul men who followed him. Nonetheless, Sean did not don his ceremonial armor. He met the Lord of Lorn in the king's chamber wearing battle armor.

Lorn, who was wearing an ornate coat of blackened ceremonial armor, gave Sean a quizzical look. "Are you expecting a fight?"

Sean bowed. "I figured it best to be prepared for anything, uncle."

Lorn patted his shoulder. "You're a good lad."

A long breath whistled through Sean's lips. He didn't expect anything to go awry, but Fraser's death weighed heavily on his conscience. "Sentries are posted atop the battlements as usual and I have a contingent of fifty men surrounding the chapel."

"You did take me seriously," Lorn chuckled. "You've a mob of

brigands guarding the chapel? What will my guests think?"

"They're hardly brigands." Sean pulled his helm over his head and pushed up the visor. "Would you rather not be well guarded?"

Lorn studied himself in the looking glass. "I asked you to provide security for my wedding, not to invite an army to it."

Perhaps Sean had overreacted. "Shall I have them stand down?"

Lorn squinted. "You say you've scoured the forest?"

"Aye."

"And the pier?"

"Not a galley moored that isn't accounted for."

The old man batted his hand through the air. "Then there's little for which to be concerned. Send your army home and keep a few steadfast guards."

Sean knew better than to abandon all security. Aye, most of their work had been done, but to send the guard back to Dunollie would be folly. "You must be jesting. How am I to insure your safety?"

"You're the best man with a blade I know." Lorn appeared too relaxed—perhaps indulged in a tad too much whisky before donning his armor. "I do not want a cohort of men surrounding the chapel—it will look more like we're attending a hanging than a wedding."

Sean didn't like it. Bloody hell, the man first asked him to provide security and then told him to send his men away. *Ballocks to that.*

Sean excused himself and found Angus in the great hall. "Lorn wants the guard hidden."

"Pardon?" The man-at-arms nearly spat out his teeth with the force of his P.

"You heard me. He said to send our men home, but we didn't scour the forest to walk away and let our enemies move into place." Sean lowered his voice. "I've not informed him about Fraser."

Angus held up his hands. "So what do you want me to do?"

"Tell the men to pull back—stay out of sight, all except a few. I want two guards at the chapel doors and escorts for Lorn and his bride along the path from the castle."

Angus scratched his head. "Sounds like a lot of work for nothing. Where do you want me?"

"Lead the men in the forest. Remain mounted. If you hear the ram's horn, you'll ken what to do."

"Aye, I bloody well ken what to do—ring Lorn's neck. 'Tis a dangerous game he plays."

"I do not like it either, but he's our lord and master."

"Aye and soon his daft son, Dugald, will be lording over us."

Sean clamped his gauntleted hand on Angus's shoulder. "Dugald Stewart is Lorn's flesh and blood. 'Tis past time he was given his due."

Angus's expression grew dark. "He's a bastard, just like…" He

pursed his lips and shook his head. “Och, bugger it.”

Sean puzzled while he watched his henchman march out the doors. Though a fine warrior, Angus allowed himself to grow emotional about things that shouldn’t concern him. So Lorn wanted to legitimize his only son? As far as Sean was concerned, the Stewart lord should have done it sooner.

After Sean rejoined the wedding party, they started for the castle with a small, but respectable assembly of knights. “Where is Dugald, m’lord?” Sean asked.

“He’s already at the chapel with his mother.” Lorn’s eyes sparked with pride. “I thought it would be best if he stood up for her.”

“Good thinking.” Sean gestured toward the door. “Shall we proceed?”

Once they exited the barbican bridge, the hair on Sean’s nape stood on end. His gaze shifted across the scene. He’d been a warrior too long to ignore the familiar warning. As they neared the chapel, sweat burned his underarms, a prickling sensation skittering across his skin. Sean grasped the hilt of his sword.

The townspeople lined the path, shaded by birch and oak trees. An anxious hum filled the air, akin to a beehive. All were eager to see the Lord of Lorn in his regalia. They placed flowers and flung rose petals before him, shouting congratulations and good tidings.

But still, that damned prickling needled at Sean’s neck.

Everything slowed. He looked right, then left. His steady breathing rushed in his ears. The sound of Lorn’s voice registered, but Sean couldn’t make out the words. Due to the clamminess of his skin, for a moment he thought he might have contracted an illness.

When the chapel door came into view, Sean stared at the guards posted outside it. They wore MacDougall colors with hauberks beneath and great helms atop their heads. He squinted—true, a number of his men possessed bucket-shaped helms, but Angus would have instructed them to remove them for this wedding duty. Such helms were worn on the battlefield alone.

“Did you hear me?” Lorn asked.

“Pardon, m’lord.” Sean blinked and shook his head. “I was assessing my men.”

“Me as well.” He pointed at the guards. “I daresay you are frightening my guests with this display of mettle.”

Sean ground his back molars. “Apologies. I’ll have them remove their helms after you’ve moved inside.”

“Aye? I’m sure that will make a fine impression once everyone is out of sight.” Lorn’s sarcasm was palpable.

“At least you will be wed knowing you are safe. I did not take your request lightly.” A bead of sweat drained into Sean’s eye.

Two paces before they reached the door, the guard nearest Sean shifted his battleax across his body—a defensive pose. Sean squinted at the eyes flickering under the concealing helm—eyes filled with hate. His gut clamped into a solid ball as he drew his sword. The guard advanced. Stepping in front of Lorn, Sean shielded the earl with his body and deflected a downward blow. Those eyes still glared at him with evil intent.

Sean's attacker moved with lightning speed. With a swing of his sword, he met the battleax midair, slicing it in two. From his sleeves, the guard pulled two knives and advanced with the screech of a madman. Swinging his blade in an arc, Sean defended the attack, protecting Lorn's right flank. He prayed to God, someone had the earl's left. Around them, grunts of the fight escalated. Iron clanged to the rear and to his sides. Unable to avert his gaze, Sean defended the attack as knives slashed at his face.

Beside him, Lorn dropped, a hideous scream ripping through the air. Bellowing like a warrior, Sean swung his blade in an arc, cutting through the neck sinews of his attacker. The helm flew from the young man's head. *Gawen. A traitor after all.*

Afforded a heartbeat to assess the battle, what Sean had seen through his side vision was confirmed. The Lord of Lorn clutched at his gut, blood streaming through his fingers.

"Sound the alarm!" Sean bellowed while he watched his men as they were cut down by an army that appeared from nowhere.

"Bring the priest. I will be wed before I draw my last breath," Lorn wheezed.

Sean raced for the doors as a blow came from his right. Slamming the pommel of his dirk into his attacker's skull, he continued on. The priest opened the door with Lorn's bride. Her face contorted with fear as she looked past the holy man's shoulder.

"I've killed the tyrant lord and now MacDougall will be mine!" From behind, MacCoul's rasping voice attacked Sean's every nerve.

His worst fears confirmed—the bastard had warned him with Fraser's gruesome delivery.

"Recite the vows now. My son will be my heir!" Lorn shouted.

Sean spun to face the scourge who had plagued his every waking hour. The bastard who cared only for ruination, for destruction.

The priest's Latin chants rang above the maelstrom, but Sean couldn't stop. For an instant, Sean caught sight of MacCoul's beady eyes glaring at him beneath the eye slits in the hideous helm. The bastard raised his sword and advanced on the bleeding and wounded lord.

Clenching his teeth, Sean launched himself at MacCoul, slamming his feet into his chest, knocking him from completing a blow intended

to sever Lorn's head. The blackguard skittered backward, but Sean didn't hesitate. Rage propelling him forward, he advanced with relentless hacks of his blade.

Alan defended each blow, weakening with every strike. Sean would show no quarter this time. The menace would pay with his life. Alan fell to his backside. Sean pounced, pulling his blade up for the killing thrust.

A crack blasted in his ears, reverberating in his helm. The world shattered. Sean's eyes rolled back as bitter bile burned his throat. His failing arms worked to continue with his strike, but his knees buckled before his blade connected with MacCoul's neck.

As he hit ground, everything grew peaceful, quiet and black.

Alan MacCoul laughed out loud when Sean MacDougall dropped to the earth. Most of the guests stood around them, cowering with looks of horror on their faces. The pummeling of horse hooves shook the ground.

Alan's gaze darted to the miserable Lord of Lorn, surrounded by guardsmen, taking his vows. *One plan thwarted. At least the maggot won't see out the night. I'll deal with his sniveling offspring later*.

"Riders," Brus yelled, his voice echoing from beneath his great helm.

Trevor sprinted up, leading the horses. "Make haste."

Alan grasped MacDougall under the arms. "Help me heft him."

Brus kicked the Dunollie chieftain. "Do you think he's dead?"

Alan strained with Sean's weight. "I'll take no chances." He picked up MacDougall's sword and secured it in his belt.

Together the three men draped MacDougall's body over a horse. "Quickly. They'll be upon us before we can blink."

Alan and his band of renegades mounted and raced for Dunstaffnage's barbican.

Behind them, Angus urged his men faster.

Alan clutched MacDougall's reins tightly in his fist. *The miserable bastard had best not be dead. He hasn't suffered enough*.

He buried his spurs deep into his horse's barrel demanding more speed. Glancing over his shoulder, his gut clenched. Angus and the MacDougall army were gaining. Alan squinted against the wind whistling through his eye slits. The iron teeth of the portcullis loomed ahead, but if it didn't close quickly, they'd have another battle on their hands. He could make it. "Lower the gate," he bellowed. "Now!"

While he surged forward, he pulled the trailing horse alongside him. MacDougall's body bounced and listed sideways. The cogs of the portcullis groaned and creaked to life as the teeth of the deadly gate inched downward. Alan dug in his heels and plastered his body

against his mount's neck. An iron spike scraped the back plate of his armor with a screech.

Once they cleared, the guardsmen let the gate drop with a resounding boom. Alan looked back. Angus and the MacDougall guards reined their horses to a halt. Alan motioned to an archer on the battlements.

The guard pointed his bow high and let his arrow soar. Alan grinned. Then his laugh thundered in his helm. His plan had been executed flawlessly—except for Lorn. But Alan would solve that minor detail at a later date. At least Dugald Stewart was a sniveling maggot who deserved to be a bastard.

All in all, he had won. While the miserable wedding party processed, his men had slipped in and taken Dunstaffnage Castle from under MacDougall's nose. Soon all would know the truth and Alan would become the rightful Chieftain of Dunollie. *And once Dugald has been dispatched, the king will grant me the Lordship of Lorn*.

Alan's men dismounted in Dunstaffnage's inner bailey and removed their helms. Shoving them in the air, the cry of victory echoed between the old castle walls.

Alan's throat tightened, though he forced a frown. He dismounted. "We're not finished yet. Is the blacksmith ready?"

"Aye, m'lord," said Trevor, bowing deeply.

"Brus, you're in charge of the siege until my return. Trevor, bring two strong men and come with me. MacDougall weighs more than a pregnant heifer."

A burly warrior stepped forward. "I'll carry him, m'lord."

Alan smirked and assessed the man's form. "I like a man with ambition. Follow me."

Heading toward the last phase of his coup, Alan led a small group of men as they slipped out a long forgotten sea gate and into a waiting *birlinn*.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sean's head throbbed as if his skull had been bludgeoned on the inside. He tried to open his eyes, but the slightest movement tortured him with relentless pounding. Everything hurt. Points of his flesh ached like he was resting on a bed of iron rivets. He shivered against the cold. The air smelled of dirt and rotting seaweed. Water dripped in the distance.

Am I in a dungeon?

The thought made his head throb so badly, his stomach churned. Sean swallowed, another movement that made him wish for death. If the banging inside his head grew any worse, it would kill him for certain.

Though the air was dank, his lips were chapped, his mouth dry. *How long have I been unconscious?*

A light flashed and a vision of a battle passed through Sean's mind. The last he remembered, he'd been in a cutthroat fight to save Lorn. *The earl was stabbed, but called for the priest.*

A drop of water splashed on Sean's nose. Sniffing, he tried to move his hand, but his arm hit cold iron. His eyes flashed open. Iron bars blocked his view. He again tried to move his arm—turn his head, but he couldn't move. Even his legs were encased in irons. Nervous sweat oozed across his skin. *My God, wake me from this nightmare.*

A contemptible laugh echoed off the walls and increased the pounding in Sean's head. His skin crawled. Only one man had such a distasteful, grating rasp to his voice. *Alan MacCoul.*

"I wondered if you would give me the satisfaction of waking."

Sean's jaw tightened as he focused his glare on the dark figure sitting across from him.

"It would have been rather disappointing if you had died before I had my say."

"You'll hang for this," Sean growled through clenched teeth, his vision blurring with every throb of his skull.

Alan smirked. "I think not."

"You've murdered the Lord of Lorn."

"Aye." Alan looked at his fingernails. "But not before he managed to make that miserable lout his heir."

"Dugald was his firstborn."

Alan sniffed. "Och aye, how valiant of John Stewart to recognize his bastard son before he drew his last breath."

Sean clenched his fist—at least the irons provided enough room for one simple motion. So, Alan had been successful with his attempt to kill the earl? Evidently the slimy maggot had more than one score to

settle. Sean forced down his urge to heave and shifted his eyes to scan his surroundings. This was not a dungeon, it was a bloody cave. "Where are we?"

"On my father's miserable island. The place where he wanted me to settle and raise a flock of sheep. Kerrera."

"Your father?" *He kens who his father is?* Sean's mind engaged. "But Kerrera is Dunollie land."

"Aye, and unofficially given to me by *our* father. The louse couldn't even bother to make a grant of land legal."

Sean closed his eyes and tried to shake his head, only to be met with cold iron rivets stabbing his temples. "Did you say *our*?"

"You miserable wretch." Alan prodded Sean in the ribs with a stick. "Our father never recognized me as the firstborn son. For years I stood by and watched him mollycoddle you, give you the best of everything whilst I was doled out the scraps. The bastard was even too embarrassed to recognize my birthright on his deathbed."

"I didn't—"

"Of course you didn't. You were always too wrapped up in your own spoilt self to give a damn about anything or anyone. I stood by and watched you learn to ride the finest horses whilst I was given a nag. You had the finest clothes, the finest weapons, and I received a bent sword thrown out by one of Father's guards." Alan held up the Chieftain of Dunollie's sword. "But this one I shall keep for myself."

Sean swallowed. He had a brother? But Alan had gone too far, blood kin or nay. He attempted to move his arms, but was held back by riveted irons digging into his flesh. "Why did you not tell me?"

An ugly chuckle resounded between the cave walls bringing back Sean's headache full force. "Me? Tell you we're kin? Oh no. You need to pay for all your years of tyranny—all of Father's favors—every last farthing in the Dunollie coffers." Alan poked him again. Sean's ribs throbbed. How long had MacCoul been jabbing him with that stick? "When you cut off my funds, you tore away the last shred of my… ah…*affection*."

Sean closed his eyes and grimaced. *Angus and Murdach knew*. But something was still amiss. Alan had attacked him before Sean uncovered the missing coin. "You are the lowest of whoresons. I cannot believe Angus and Murdach conspired with you."

The bastard had the gall to laugh again. "You're jesting. Those miserable sops wouldn't assuage their loyalty to Dunollie for all the coin in Scotland."

So they were protecting Father. "How did you slip past the Dunollie guard?"

Alan smirked. "Your pitiful guard." He threw his head back and howled. "I've a loyal man or two within your ranks."

"Gawen."

"Aye," he chuckled. "Wearing great helms and your colors, not even Angus knew the difference." Alan raised his damned stick, but hesitated. "I'd have been able to take Dunstaffnage much more easily if Angus wasn't such a loyal prick."

In a burst of rage, Sean rattled the irons with all his strength. "You traitor!" he roared. "You've taken Dunstaffnage?" If only he could grab that stick and shove it down the bastard's throat. What more was this monster accountable for? *I'll hang every single backstabber in my ranks*.

"Aye and next I'll take Dunollie." Alan leaned over, his nose so close, the man's foul breath seeped across Sean's face. "Once word of the lands denied me reaches his royal highness, he'll have no recourse but to name me Chieftain of Dunollie and Lord of Lorn."

Coughing against the stench, Sean glared. "You've gone completely mad." *King James will never grant lands to a bastard—especially one who used force to seize the king's property*.

Alan probed with the stick—harder this time. "Angry as hell, but not mad, brother."

Sean closed his eyes and swallowed his urge to bellow. MacCoul had not only proven he was a raving lunatic, he was capable of the most heinous crimes imaginable. Sean's back sunk into cold iron rivets. Though unable to move his head, he knew the trickles sliding down his skin were blood. "So 'tis the death of a lowlife for me, then?" Sean kept his voice steady, but inside he wanted to bellow, wring the cur's neck and tell him exactly what he thought of his miserable coup.

"'Tis what you deserve." The cold stare in MacCoul's black eyes made Sean shudder.

If there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was being cosseted—a mummy wrapped in iron. Again he shuddered. A blend of sweat and blood oozed from his temple to his mouth. He had to get out. He clenched every muscle in his body and stared. He hated to utter kind words to a madman, but it was Sean's last hope. "Release me now and together we will rule Dunollie lands." He forced a smile. "Think on it. Together we'll be more powerful than our ancestors. We'll take back the Lordship of the Isles and rule the Highlands."

Alan smirked. "I've an army of two hundred, and every day more fighting men frustrated with our weakling king come to me begging for a place in my guard."

Christ, things grew worse with Alan's every word. Sean clenched his teeth against the throbbing pain and strained with all his might to break the irons. God in heaven, he needed to ring Alan's bloody neck. "You'll never get away with this," he seethed.

When Alan stood, Sean focused on the sword in Alan's belt—the same one he was given at their father's funeral. "Well, little brother." The bastard whacked the stick over the top of Sean's head, splintering it on the irons. "You won't be around to witness my success. Everyone saw me spirit your body into Dunstaffnage Castle. Little did they know I uncovered an ancient sea gate on the firth side."

Stars clouding his vision, his heart could have exploded. The bastard intended to leave him for a rat's feast? Sean strained his arms against the welded irons encasing them. He fought and jerked his entire body, but the welds held firm.

Alan stood back and crossed his arms. "Fight all you like. The smithy made your cage impenetrable. You *will* die here." He set a cup of water beyond Sean's reach. "Be it from thirst or starvation, I do not much care, as long as your death is a painful one."

Ice pulsed through Sean's veins. Death gibbeted by irons was the most torturous demise imaginable. Buzzards would peck out his eyes before he succumbed, rats would feast upon his flesh. "You wouldn't," he hissed through clenched teeth.

Alan threw the broken stick against the cave wall and strode away, the rumble of his laugh crawling up Sean's skin.

He drew in gasps of breath while he turned his head side to side, inhibited by strips of iron. God on the cross, even Alan wouldn't stoop so low. "Give me a knight's death! Please brother, if you have a soul, you will not leave me to face the vilest coward's death!"

Sean strained with all his might but the irons budged not an inch. Sweat streamed into his eyes and across his flesh. His lips trembled with every sharp inhale. He fought again, this time, the rivets stabbing him with unyielding bites.

"You cannot leave me here!"

Gyllis responded so well to Meg's warm compresses that two days ago she'd started walking without assistance. She'd taken to forcing herself to climb the tower steps to the wall-walk and pacing around the battlements. The ascent was strenuous, but every day the effort grew a wee bit easier. From the top of Kilchurn's walls, Gyllis could see for miles, spotting riders by land or boats approaching down the long and narrow Loch Awe.

She'd hoped Sean would have paid a visit at least one more time before the Lord of Lorn's wedding, but she understood how a chieftain must attend his responsibilities. She clapped her hands together and held her fingers to her lips with a smile. He'd be so impressed with her progress. She had a horrible limp, but one day she would grow so strong no one would ever know she'd suffered paralysis.

Amid one of her daily walks, Gyllis strode along the back of the

castle wall-walk, which had a glorious view of Loch Awe. When the ram's horn sounded, she snapped her head toward the lead guard positioned on the wall across the courtyard, but she couldn't see beyond the stone battlements. Running her hand over the merlon notches, she hastened her pace. By the time she reached the front of the castle, she gasped to catch her breath.

Patting her chest with her hand, she peered down the long path that led from the west to the castle. *Sean!* Horses cantered with haste, flying the Dunollie pennant. Gyllis couldn't make out the riders, but there was no need. Sean had come at last.

She raced for the stairwell. Her toe caught on a raised edge of stone. Flinging her arms out, Gyllis grabbed the craggy stone to stop her momentum. Her fingers latched onto the battlement ledge while her body flailed midair. Clenching her teeth, she prepared herself for the jarring impact.

An arm wrapped around her waist as thick chainmail cut into her back. "'Tis probably best not to try to run yet, lassie," a gruff voice said.

Firm hands gripped her shoulders and Gyllis glanced up. Sir Mevan smiled upon her with his careworn face. "My thanks."

He knit his thick eyebrows together. "Where are your crutches?"

"I've no longer a need for them."

He eyed her like a concerned father. "Then you must take care. It hasn't been all that long since I carried you to your chamber stricken with the first symptoms of paralysis."

She bowed her head and curtsied. "Thank you for reminding me. I shall exercise more care in the future." Her heart fluttered so fast, she hated to think of slowing her pace before she reached the bottom of the tower stairs. If only she could speed her recovery even more.

Mevan waved her away and Gyllis limped to the stairwell, using the wall for balance. When finally she arrived in the great hall, Duncan was escorting Angus and a few other Dunollie guardsmen into his solar. She knit her brows and stared at the keep's double doors. Surely Sean would be among them. Discounting her idea to go to the courtyard and look for Sean's horse, she hastened to the solar door.

The voices within were filled with muffled turmoil. She pressed her ear to the door to better hear them.

"'Tis grave indeed m'lord." Angus's weathered baritone was clearer now.

"The Lord of Lorn is murdered and the Chieftain of Dunollie captured?" Duncan's voice asked.

Gyllis clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her gasp. *Sean captured? Lorn dead?* She couldn't breathe.

"Aye. All of Dunstaffnage is under siege."

My God, could it be worse?

"I never on my life thought MacCoul had the wherewithal to follow through with his threats," Duncan said. "The piss-swilling whoreson."

"Not even Sir Sean's father would have been able to turn a blind eye to Alan's treachery now."

"What say you?" Duncan asked. "Sean's complaints of his father turning a blind eye are founded?"

"Aye, m'lord."

"But why the devil did the old man allow it?"

"Laird Alan MacDougall swore me to secrecy with his last breath… Please m'lord, consider his given name. If you think on it, you cannot help but guess."

After a long moment of silence, Gyllis pressed her ear harder. Mother stepped beside her with an alarmed look and did the same.

"By God," Duncan said. "Alan MacDougall sired a bastard?"

"An elder bastard—one blind with rage and hell-bent on revenge." Footsteps clamored toward the door. "We've no time to waste. We must away to Dunstaffnage at once."

Gyllis clutched her arms around her midsection when the door opened, her eyes wide, the two women facing Duncan's grim stare. Her gaze darted from her brother to Angus. "W-where is Sir Sean?"

Duncan marched past them. "This doesn't concern you."

"Och aye, it does." Gyllis limped beside him with Mother right behind. "I love him. I-I must go to him at once."

Duncan pointed to Mevan. "Assemble the guard. We leave within the hour." Then he grasped Gyllis's shoulders. "You and I will have words about the source of your ill-grown feelings upon my return."

"You cannot leave me here." She pushed Duncan's hands away. "I must go."

"I ken you're not daft, sister. What good would a crippled woman be amongst an army of Campbell men?"

"But—"

"I said no," he bellowed. "Your place is here with your mother. Do not make me confine you to quarters."

Ma patted Gyllis's shoulder. "Come, dear, be reasonable. You must leave the fighting to the men."

Gyllis clapped a hand over her mouth. Locked in her chamber, she could be of no use to Sean. Worse, she'd be in the dark with no news of the siege. She threw a pleading glance at Angus. "Will Sir Sean be all right?"

The henchman shook his head, his eyes filled with fear. "I've no idea if he's even still alive, miss."

Gasping, Gyllis could have jumped out of her skin. Tears stung her

eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Sean was in trouble and she was forbidden to go to him? Surely she could be of help. Somehow. No one could expect her to remain behind. “Duncan, please. I can cook, or mend or…or be a healer.” Her head spun. “I’ve been tended to so much these past months, I’ve had a lifetime of education in the healing arts.”

Mother grasped Gyllis’s arm and pulled her toward the stairwell.

“This cannot be happening.” She snapped her gaze to Ma’s face. “If Alan captured Sean, he’ll kill him.”

She couldn’t breathe. The room started spinning.

“Fetch Lady Meg,” Mother shouted at a serving maid. “Tell her Gyllis needs a calming tincture.”

“I do not!” Gyllis wrenched her arm away. Sobbing, she attempted to dash after Duncan, but her knees gave out and she fell, sprawling over the floorboards. “Blast my weakness!” The world was shattering around her and her miserable legs were too weak to withstand it.

Mother crouched beside Gyllis and patted her back. “I ken how worried you are, but Duncan is right. The men will face Alan MacCoul and rescue Sir Sean.”

“But what if he’s already *dead*?” The words caught in her throat as if placed there by Satan. An uncontrollable whimper seeped through her clenched teeth. Every extremity shook. This couldn’t be happening. Sean had to be all right.

Offering her hand, Mother helped Gyllis up. “If Alan MacCoul kills Sir Sean, he is more of a fool than the lot of us believe. He’ll have nothing with which to bargain.”

“He may very well be a fool.” Gyllis grasped her mother’s arm and together the two women staggered up the stairs. “The man is consumed by hate.”

Once inside her chamber, Gyllis still couldn’t breathe. “How can you appear so calm? Sir Sean has been a part of this family for years.”

Mother gestured to the settee. “It is not that I choose to do nothing. Our role is to wait and pray for not only the Chieftain of Dunollie’s health, but for a quick victory by Duncan and our men so they all return home to their families.” She sat. “Where is Meg with that tincture?”

Gyllis’s limp became more pronounced as she paced. “I do not need a mind-numbing tonic.” What she needed was to be on a horse heading west.

“Sit down before you fall,” Mother ordered, her tone growing irritated. She patted the seat beside her. “Come. Let us read *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle.* You’ve told me so much about it, I’m anxious to hear the story for myself.”

Gyllis plopped beside Ma. “I cannot possibly read at a time like

this."

"Perhaps if I read, the story will help calm you."

Gyllis clamped her mouth shut and nodded. She was about to jump out of her skin and Ma wanted to read?

"You are smitten with Sir Sean," Mother said, as if she'd just figured it out, but Gyllis knew better than to think her mother dim-witted. And the matron had only returned from Helen's wedding last eve. Helen had promised to hint at Gyllis's yen to marry Sean, but Ma was shrewd and Gyllis had best play along. Besides, the woman knew everything that went on under Kilchurn's eaves. If a pin dropped, Ma would know about it.

"I care for him. I always have." Since Sean had not approached Duncan about their engagement, she wouldn't make such a confession now.

"And he cares for you," Mother said. "I am still surprised to know he had your crutches made. I must speak to Duncan about…" her voice trailed off.

Gyllis chanced a glance in Mother's direction. "About?"

Ma batted her hand through the air. "'Tis nothing. This mess with Mr. MacCoul must be settled first. Come, read to me."

Before Gyllis opened the book, Meg rushed in, carrying a cup and pitcher. "My heavens. I came as soon as the twins were settled."

Gyllis held up her hands. "I do not need a tincture. Ma was overreacting."

"I should say not." Meg poured a cup of her potion. "You must be worried to death. Take this—you'll feel much better."

Gyllis took the cup and grimaced. "I honestly would prefer—"

"Drink it," Mother commanded. "We all could use a tot. The lot of us are worried half to death."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Gyllis had no idea what time it was when she woke. Meg's tincture had her dozing before she finished reading the first page of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. From her bed, she peered around her chamber. The others must have made it to their rooms because she was alone.

After lighting the candle, Gyllis slipped out of bed, her toes hitting cold floorboards. It didn't make a difference that they were in the midst of summer, night air still brought a chill. She gathered the plaid from the foot of her bed and lumbered toward the window embrasure. Pulling aside the furs, a moonbeam glistened blue-white on Loch Awe.

She strained for a glimpse of the eastern sky. From what she could tell, it was close to midnight. The sun wouldn't make an appearance for some time. Dropping the curtain, she rubbed her eyes to clear her head from the poppy juice or whatever it was Meg had drugged her with.

She clutched the plaid tighter around her body and faced the door.

Then a clammy sensation of dread spread across her skin, so powerful, it was as if a ghost had passed over her soul.

Gyllis froze.

"I will imprison you in irons and laugh while your body rots in a dank cave." The vow Alan swore when Sean defeated him at Beltane rang so clear in her mind, it was as if she'd heard the words spoken aloud right there in her bedchamber.

Had Alan been planning this even before Sean's father passed? She clenched her fists. *Will Duncan remember? I may limp, but I have a strong mind and I know of no one with a more determined will.*

But traveling alone during the day was dangerous. Who knew how much more perilous the twenty-mile trip would be at night…and for a woman.

At once she knew what must be done.

Gyllis hastened to her dressing table and quickly braided her hair. She could not allow anything to impede her determination this time or she'd never spirit past the gate.

After donning a pair of sturdy boots, she cast the plaid aside. Not even bothering to wrap herself in a dressing gown, she headed for Duncan's chamber.

Gyllis cracked open the door and peered inside. The room was so dim, she could scarcely make out the four-poster bed, but she heard breathing. Since they'd been wed, Lady Meg had taken to staying in Duncan's chamber. They used the adjoining "lady's" bedchamber for a nursery.

Slipping inside, Gyllis held up her candle and stared at the bed, watching for any sign of movement. She didn't dare shut the door. A click of the hasp could ruin her plans. As quietly as she could, she tiptoed to the trunk where Duncan stowed his things, and set the candle on a nearby table.

The flame didn't cast much light and the contents of the trunk were dark as a dungeon. Sliding her hands over the clothing on top, then down the sides, grainy leather brushed her fingertips. *Breeks*. Her heart leapt as she tugged the trousers from beneath the pile. Holding them out, she stepped into the legs, shoving her shift through the waistband. When she released, the breeks slipped low around her hips. *Still too large*.

She turned toward the candle and examined the waistline. A cord swung, catching the light. *If only I had more experience with men's garments*. She found a matching cord on the other side and tied the breeks snugly around her waist. It felt awkward to have the bulk of her shift scrunched about her hips, but at least the linen filled up some of the extra space. She'd never realized how much larger Duncan was.

Her eyes adjusting to the dim light, she had an easier time locating a linen shirt—right on top. She pulled it over her head then tugged the laces closed and looked down. The shirt was large enough to hide her bosoms for the most part—and she couldn't spare the time to bind them. With one last dip into the trunk, she found one of Duncan's quilted doublets. By the musty smell, it had been well worn, but would help conceal her form. She shrugged into the oversized garment and rolled up the sleeves to her wrists.

Once assembled, she inspected her attire and pointed a toe to the side. *I think this will do. Now all I need is a hood*. She drummed her fingers against her lips. If only she'd kept her plaid. She'd never seen Duncan wear a hood. He either wore a feathered bonnet as a sign of his barony, or a helm. She picked up the candle and searched inside the trunk one more time, but found nothing resembling a hood.

Biting her lip, she turned toward the bed. Lady Meg lay on her side with the bedclothes pulled up to her chin. All Gyllis needed to do was walk across the floor and pull the plaid from the footboard.

Easy enough.

Taking her first steps proved awkward. She'd never worn a pair of breeks before. The leather chafed her inner thighs. With her next footfall, her ankle twisted. She stumbled toward the bed, but caught herself before she fell. Had that happened a sennight ago, she would have fallen for certain.

Gyllis held her breath and peered at Lady Meg. By God's grace, the woman remained sound asleep. Drawing in a calming breath, Gyllis picked up the plaid, bundled it under her arm and headed for the

passageway.

She'd nearly made it to the door when a floorboard creaked loud enough to wake the dead.

Behind her, the bed rattled and Meg gasped. "Who's there?" she clipped in a high-pitched voice.

Gyllis stopped and glanced back.

Sitting up, Meg had the bedclothes clutched under her chin. "Gyllis? What are you doing?"

"Nothing—go back to sleep."

"Why are you wearing breeks?"

Gyllis inched toward the door. "Please, just ignore me."

"Are those Duncan's?" Meg crawled across the bed. "What are you planning? I ken that look on your face."

With a groan, Gyllis shook out the plaid and draped it over her head. "I cannot sit in my chamber and wait for news of Sir Sean. The worry alone will kill me."

"You're not planning to spirit to Dunstaffnage by yourself?"

"What else can I do?"

Meg crossed her arms and affected a disapproving frown. "'Tis dangerous."

"If anyone in this entire household would understand, 'tis you. Goodness, I remember when you drugged your guard to help Duncan escape from Edinburgh gaol."

She tsked her tongue. "Aye, but that was different."

"Was it?" Gyllis spread her palm to her side. "How can you say that? Do you know how much I love Sean? Remaining in my chamber is torture. I've no idea if he's injured or…or, I can't say it. If I do nothing I will go completely mad."

Meg slid off the bed and walked toward her. "If you must go, you should take a guard."

"Why, so he can lock me in my chamber—listen to Duncan and Mother's every word?"

"Heaven's stars. You should look at yourself. You've been ill for so long." Her eyes dropped to Gyllis's legs. "You still have a limp—still weak."

Meg's words only served to cement Gyllis's determination. Everyone would cite her illness as reason for her to be cosseted in her chamber. No one would allow her the freedom she needed. She reached for Meg's deformed hand—*the claw*, she called it. "Of all others in this family who should be able to sympathize with me, 'tis you." Meg had been mollycoddled by her family and feared by society because of her hand.

Meg tugged her claw away and rubbed it. "Will you not wait until morning?"

“Nay. I cannot risk someone seeing me.”

“Very well.” Meg took Gyllis’s candle and headed toward the garderobe. “Then I will go with you.”

Gyllis hobbled after her. She wouldn’t make it far without that candle. “What about the bairns? You cannot leave.”

Meg stepped into a kirtle and began tying the laces. “It shan’t be but for a few days. The nurse will look after Elizabeth and Colin. Besides, this gives me an excuse to see Duncan—he may need a healer—and he’s been away ever so much during my confinement.”

“Oh no, I cannot in good conscience approve of this. What if something happened to you? Duncan would never forgive me.”

Meg pulled a cloak over her shoulders. “Either we go together or I raise the alarm now.”

“You are wicked.” Gyllis clapped a hand to her chest. “I’d die if you were hurt. How can I convince you to stay?”

“You cannot.” Meg tugged another black cloak from a peg. “This is Duncan’s. It’ll be more concealing than that plaid you’ve got draped over your head. Put it on whilst I pen a missive to Lady Margaret. If we go without leaving word, she’ll send all of Argyllshire after us.”

Gyllis hadn’t thought to leave a note, but she wondered if Mother wouldn’t send an army to bring them back regardless. But then, Duncan was surrounded by his elite guard and Gyllis couldn’t worry about Ma’s reaction now. She would not return to Kilchurn until Sean was found.

On their way out, Meg insisted they stop by the kitchen and fill a satchel with oatcakes and fetch a flagon of watered wine. What they hadn’t counted on was the guard watching them approach the stables.

“What are you doing up at this hour, m’lady?” he asked of Meg, crossing his arms.

Meg’s intelligent eyes flashed toward Gyllis. Mayhap it was a blessing Duncan’s spirited wife opted to come along. “Fetch Mevan. We’ve an urgent message for Lord Duncan and need an escort to Dunstaffnage this night.”

The man didn’t move. “Can you not send a messenger? ’Tis dangerous to travel at night.”

“You heard me. I’ll not tolerate your impertinence. You will fetch Mevan or I will be forced to do it myself, after which, I will assure you, I’ll assign you to the very unsavory task of cleaning the middens.”

The guard gave her a good stare and then dropped his arms to his sides. “I’ll wake him, m’lady, but he will not be happy about it.”

Gyllis waited until the man was out of earshot. “I thought we said no guards. Mevan is liable to wake Mother.”

Meg grinned and held up her finger. “He won’t if he is with us.”

“Now I ken why Duncan says your spirit matches the color of your hair.”

After they’d ventured into the stables, Mevan marched in, growling under his breath. “What is this, you need to take a message to Duncan? If you have something urgent to say, it would be best delivered by a messenger.”

Lady Meg faced him with her fists on her hips. “I am the lady of this keep and when the lord is away, you will do my bidding. Miss Gyllis and I have business to attend at Dunstaffnage, and that is all you need to know.”

The big knight pursed his lips. “Very well. If it cannot wait until morning, you ladies will need spirited horses—ones that can outrun an attack if need be.”

Lady Meg bowed her head. “I will leave that to your wisdom. Please select horses you deem suitable.”

Mevan looked a bit less grumpy after her acquiescence. But then he assessed Gyllis with a guffaw. “Might I suggest Miss Gyllis remain behind?”

She stepped toward him. “I will not. I can ride far better than I can walk.”

Mevan frowned dubiously.

“She must come along,” Meg argued. “Now let us saddle the horses.”

Gyllis could have slammed her fist into the henchman’s big nose. She’d been right to try to slip away without anyone knowing. If Meg weren’t there she wouldn’t have made it out of the stable. And how dare Mevan look at her as if she were an invalid, of no use whatsoever?

Mevan held up a dagger. “You’d best take this. If anyone makes a go for you, slam it into his wrist like this.” He demonstrated with a downward strike.

Gyllis nodded and accepted the knife while Meg armed herself with a bow and quiver of arrows—though she had a crippled hand, Meg was an excellent markswoman, using her “claw” to pull back the bowstring.

Once mounted, Mevan took the lead, holding a torch. “We’ll ride at a walk.”

Gyllis’s mount skittered sideways. The fine-boned colt couldn’t be more than two. He whinnied and snorted through his big nostrils. “This fella wants to run.”

“Rein him in and he’ll follow my warhorse. With luck on our side, we’ll disappoint the colt and arrive at Dunstaffnage without incident.”

Gyllis kept the horse’s head down, and as Mevan said, the colt followed his gelding. Though angry at their slow pace, at least they

were on their way, and at this rate, she estimated they'd reach the castle about dawn. Thank heavens Sean had run the outlaws out of Fearnoch Forest. Their journey should be a smooth one.

The witching hour, they called it. Gyllis could barely keep her eyes open and the sway of the horse did nothing to help her stay awake. Ahead, Meg was hunched over and Gyllis suspected she was asleep. But Mevan sat tall in the saddle, still holding the torch to light their way.

Fortunately, the moon peeked through the wisps of clouds sailing above to help light the path. The eerie night shrouded the forest with dark blue hues.

He was a good man, Mevan. He'd been loyal to the Campbells for years. Mother never traveled without him. Regardless if he'd questioned Gyllis's abilities, he'd still done their bidding and she formed a new respect for the old henchman.

Something flickered out of the corner of her eye. Gyllis peered into the shadows and squinted. She saw it again—something shiny caught the light from Mevan's torch, perhaps twenty paces away. The more she stared, the clearer it became. Someone was following them. Someone clad in a breastplate with a very large sword.

"Outlaws!" she screeched, demanding a gallop from her horse.

Meg bolted upright and followed.

Mevan glanced back and cast the torch aside. "We'll outrun them," he bellowed.

In the blink of an eye, the trio sped through the wood with Gyllis in the lead. She hoped to God her horse knew the way, because the path was flying past so quickly, she couldn't be sure of each twist and turn.

"Faster!" Mevan bellowed from the rear.

Gyllis slapped her crop against the horse's rump. "Run for your life, you wee beasty!"

The forest thinned and the path became clearer in the moonlight. Gyllis dared a glance behind. Meg was close on her heels, the whites of her eyes round as silver coins. Mevan had replaced the torch with his sword, but Gyllis didn't see the outlaw. No matter, she didn't slow to give the blackguard an opportunity to catch up.

When Gyllis recognized the farmhouse on the outskirts of the village, she slowed her horse to a trot and Mevan rode in beside her. "'Tis safe now, lass."

The sky had turned violet with the coming dawn and the old guard smiled a weathered grin. Gyllis returned his grin. "Thank you, sir knight. Your assistance will not go unrewarded."

He tipped his head. "My reward is your safety, Miss Gyllis. I

carried the pails of hot water on the day of your birth whilst your mother labored. You may not be aware of it, but you're as dear to me as my own children."

She stared at his back as he rode ahead and led them into the encampment. Yes, the old guard was a good man and now she knew why her mother trusted him with their lives.

After they found Duncan's tent and Meg announced their arrival, Gyllis's brother shoved the flap aside and glared at them both. Gyllis could have sworn a fire flickered in his dark eyes, his black hair mussed by sleep, all the while his face grew redder until his angry stare focused on Meg. "What the devil were you thinking? Why are you here? What about the twins? How could you have ridden all that way in the dark of night?"

Gyllis stammered. "I…we…" did he have to look so exceedingly angry?

"Are those *my* clothes?" Duncan snatched the hem of his—Gyllis's doublet. "Merciful holy Christ—"

"Stop." Meg held up her hands. "If you'd take a breath, I might gain a fleeting moment to explain."

He rolled his hand with a heated, yet expectant look.

"Firstly, the bairns will be fine in their nurse's arms for a few days, especially with your mother's constant doting. Besides, I can be of more use to you here—"

"We must find Sir Sean," Gyllis interrupted.

"Tell me something I do not already know." Duncan's steely gaze shifted her way. "Alan MacCoul has him in Dunstaffnage's dungeon."

Gyllis wrung her hands. "I do not believe so."

Duncan guffawed with his sneer. "So you think you know better than a dozen witnesses? Does wearing my clothing suddenly make you an expert?" He frowned, looking her over from head to toe. "Stay here. I'll fetch the guard to take you home." He started away and shook his finger. "But you'll be taking good men away from their posts."

"We are not leaving," Lady Meg called after him, but he proceeded on, marching like he was mad enough to kick a wounded dog.

Meg grasped Gyllis's arm. "You know something."

She drew in a ragged breath and nodded. "I remembered what Alan MacCoul said when he and Sean fought at Beltane—told him he would watch Sean die in irons whilst rotting in a cave."

"Why did you not tell Duncan?"

"If he'd given me a chance, I would have—but he wouldn't listen anyway. He never listens to me." Gyllis peered over her shoulder. "I must find Angus. He'll help me."

"Go. I'll set Duncan's priorities. Do what you must."

Gyllis caught her hand. "Thank you."

The morning's mist had begun to lift while Gyllis hastened through the camp, searching for the MacDougall pennant. She stumbled over an exposed tree root. Stutter-stepping, she tried to catch her balance, but her legs wouldn't work fast enough. With a yelp, she fell hands-first. Pain shot up through her wrists. Clenching her teeth, she rubbed them.

"Bloody Christmas, stumbling over a wee branch?" a deep voice cursed behind her. "Were you in your cups all night, lad?"

Gyllis blinked, remembering she looked more lad than lass. She tugged the hood lower over her forehead. "Nay. The nasty thing caught the tip of my boot," she said in her deepest voice.

The man walked around front of her, but Gyllis kept her head low and stared at his feet. "You're just a lad. What is your business here? You could be hurt."

"I've a message for Angus, the MacDougall henchman."

"Oh do you now?" The man offered a weathered hand. "Then you best be telling me what it is."

"'Tis only for his ears." As she took his hand, Gyllis peered out from under her hood and gasped.

With a startled gasp, Angus tugged her up and stepped forward. "Miss Gyllis, what are you doing here? All matter of harm could befall you. This is an *army* camp—no place for a lady."

She stamped her foot. "That is why I'm dressed as a man."

"I'm afraid your disguise will not protect you for long. You're too bonny to mistake for a lad."

Gyllis swallowed her smile. She'd seen a bonny lad or two in her lifetime. Not that Sean looked feminine—but heaven help her, that he was bonny was not to be argued. She cupped a hand alongside her mouth so she'd not be overheard. It wouldn't be surprising if there were spies about. "Do you know of a cave nearby?"

"Aye, there are a few."

"Any that are secluded where a man wouldn't be found—perhaps on Dunollie land?"

Angus wrapped his fingers around his greying beard and tugged. "I don't ken…I seem to recall a cave on Kerrera—in the Firth of Lorn just south of the castle. On a clear day you can see it from the shore. But 'tis just an undeveloped island. There's nothing on it."

"Kerrera? That must be it." She grasped his arm and recited Alan MacCoul's threat.

Angus continued to scratch his beard. "Aye, but everyone saw Alan's men haul him into the castle."

“Did you see this as well?”

“Nay, I was patrolling the forest when the attack happened.”

“Is it impossible for Alan to have spirited Sean to Kerrera?”

“Well, nothing’s impossible, I suppose.” Angus glanced in the direction of Duncan’s tent. “But the Lord of Glenorchy is planning an attack soon, cannons should be arriving from Castle Stalker in a day. Once we storm the castle, we’ll find the chieftain, I’m certain of it.”

“Cannons?” Gyllis peered through the trees at the Dunstaffnage battlements. “Is that why we haven’t driven them out yet?”

“We’ve tried.” He pointed. “Every time we move within shooting distance, the bastards rain arrows upon us. Duncan also sent a missive to the Earl of Argyll requesting more targes to protect our men on the battering ram.”

“When will the shields arrive?”

“Today, God willing.”

“Please.” Gyllis clasped her palms together. “All I ask is that we sail to Kerrera to look in the cave. You’ll be back before Duncan even discovers you’re missing.”

“I’d like to help you, lass, but Sean MacDougall is shivering in Dunstaffnage’s dungeon—not in the bloody cave on Kerrera. I can feel it in my bones.” He grasped her elbow. “Come, I’ll take you to your brother and he can organize an escort to take you home.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Two days. Sean licked his bleeding lips with a coarse and dry tongue. Another day without water and he'd be dead for certain. Everything ached. The rivets knifing into his flesh had already worn ulcers. His neck was stiff. Even the slightest movement of his chin caused a jabbing pain that made his teeth ache.

Immobile, the irons affixed to the cave wall, he had a sense of how Christ had suffered on the cross.

The ulcers and aches Sean could bear, but thirst consumed his mind. The cold and damp were but a minor inconvenience compared to his need for water. The ceaseless dripping behind him tortured his tongue to the point where Sean tried to lick moisture from the iron bar across his mouth.

Mucous drained from his nose, yet he was helpless to wipe it, helpless even to tend to his most basic needs. His skin chafed and the odor of his own piss mixed with the stench of rotting seaweed around him plagued his guts with the urge to heave.

Sean closed his eyes and willed himself to think of Gyllis. Her memory calmed him. Taking in a shaky breath, he pictured her long chestnut tresses when they caught the wind. His fingers could feel the silkiness of her hair, his cracked lips the pillow-softness of her mouth. If only he could travel back in time to the carefree days at Ardchattan when they would sit together in the garden.

Two miserable days had passed with nary a soul in sight. The only sounds were the surf and the damned water dripping and trickling under his feet.

If only he'd spent more time with Gyllis. If only he could hold her in his arms—one more time before he perished.

God on the cross, no wonder Alan MacCoul had killed Fraser. Sean would have been much better prepared if he'd known what his half-brother had planned. And by God, he should have been more forceful with Duncan. The Lord of Glenorchy had always respected Sean's intuition in the past. He should have stood his ground. Sean recounted his visit to Kilchurn over and over. He'd succumbed to his own foolish pride by not insisting Duncan and the enforcers attend Lorn's wedding. He'd played down the threats and the raids. Deep in his soul he'd known Alan MacCoul was behind it all. But he'd been too proud to admit it to Duncan—too proud to ask for the Lord of Glenorchy's help because he was a friend. If he'd been honest and presented the depth of his concerns, Duncan would have supported the MacDougalls without question. After all, he'd dedicated his life to Duncan and his father—served in the Highland Enforcers to maintain order for King

James.

And now here he was, the feared knight, wrapped in irons, pinned to the wall, unable to wipe the snot from his face.

A water rat watched him from across the cave.

"Be gone with you." Sean's voice was so dry it painfully grated in his voice box.

The rat inched forward.

"Be gone," Sean bellowed, followed by a fit of dry coughs. The rat stopped and sat up on its haunches and stared at him, his nose twitching. Sean rattled the irons. "I'm not dead yet, you mongrel bastard!"

The rodent paced back and forth in front of Sean and his irons as if he knew Sean was helpless. The closer the creature came, the more Sean rattled his irons, the rivets digging into tender flesh.

When the rat stopped at Sean's feet, all he could do was cast his gaze downward. The first bite sunk into his shoe leathers. Stomach roiling with bile, Sean rattled his cage and slammed his foot against the unbending metal. The devil's spawn could feast all they liked after he was dead. Not before.

Gyllis should have known *a man* wouldn't listen to her. Men all took pity on her as if she were afflicted in the brain as well as in the legs. She snatched her arm away from Angus's grasp. "I am perfectly able to return to my brother's tent on my own. There is no need for you to assist me."

"Och, I'd be no kind of gentleman if I didn't see you delivered safely to his side. This camp is rife with young Highland lads who might get the wrong idea seeing a woman dressed in a pair of breeks."

Gyllis glanced toward the pier. It would be futile if she tried to run. Besides, she'd probably fall on her face like she'd done a hundred times before. Ahead, the camp started to stir, but the flutter of a blue mantle caught her eye. She smiled broadly—affecting her most innocent countenance. "There's Lady Meg. She accompanied me on the ride to Dunstaffnage. I'll join her. Duncan is arranging our transport home momentarily."

"Very well." He drew out his words slowly as if considering. "If the Lady of Glenorchy is here, I reckon I can leave you in her capable hands."

Gyllis continued to keep her voice low. She didn't want anyone else realizing she was female. "Thank you, sir. You have been most helpful."

Hastening her step, she caught up to Meg not far from a large tent and tapped her shoulder before her sister-in-law reached for the flap. "What are you doing?"

“Gyllis,” Meg said in a loud whisper. “I should be asking you the same.” She looked side to side. “Duncan could be here any moment.

“I need your help in creating a diversion.”

A crease formed between the lady’s red eyebrows. “Honestly, Gyllis. You should take Duncan’s advice and return to Kilchurn. Things here are worse than I’d imagined.”

A pained moan came from within the tent. Of course Meg would have already connived to see to the injured before she left. “And you’re not?”

“They need a healer for the hospital.”

“Please. Keep Duncan’s attention diverted as long as possible—at least until I can…ah…slip away—tell him I’ve decided to stay so that I may assist you.”

Meg frowned. “Have you gained more information? Where are you off to now?”

“I’d rather not say, lest Duncan intercept me.” Gyllis balled her fists. “I will not be stopped.”

Meg clasped her hand to her chest. “Promise me you will stay safe.” She moved her lips close to Gyllis’s ear. “Do not let on to anyone that you are a woman.”

“I promise—just keep Duncan occupied. Can you do that?”

“I’ll do my best, but you know your brother.”

Gyllis jumped at a loud commotion booming from the direction of Duncan’s tent. Hopefully the noise had nothing to do with her, but she didn’t aim to stay around long enough to find out. “I’ll see you upon my return.”

Meg gave her hand a squeeze before she released it. “Go with God.” She pulled the satchel with the oatcakes and watered wine from her shoulder. “Take this. You may need it more than I.”

Slipping away, Gyllis again tugged the hood low over her forehead, but she wouldn’t again make the mistake of greeting anyone she knew. She picked up a sturdy stick and hunched a bit so she’d be mistaken for an old man with a limp. Moving as quickly as she could, she headed for the pier.

One thing she knew for certain, the longer she remained in the foreground of Dunstaffnage, the greater the risk that Duncan would tie her to a horse and drag her home. Fortunately, all the fishermen must have set sail before dawn, because Gyllis saw not a soul. She hid behind a moored galley and held up the flap of the hood to better see. At the very end of the pier, a skiff bobbed in the water. It was exactly what she needed.

Before she set out, she peered over the galley’s hull and looked toward the camp. A skirmish had erupted between the outlaws on the wall-walk and the soldiers below. Volleys of arrows traversed through

the air while Duncan's men bellowed and slammed the pommels of their dirks against their targes. Gyllis crossed herself and offered a silent prayer for the good health of her brother and his men.

She hastened to the end of the deck, untied the skiff and carefully climbed into the tiny boat. She and her sisters often rowed a similar skiff across Loch Awe on summer days—but the Firth of Lorn was not a loch. It formed a major part of Scotland's sea trade and men sailed hearty galleys through her white-capped waves.

As she grasped the oars, she prayed the weather would hold while she pointed the boat south. Of all her problems, the greatest was that she had no idea where on Kerrera the cave might be. Would she be able to see it from the water? How far away was the island? *Angus said you can see the island from Dunollie. How much further can it be?*

But asking for help had proven futile. Everyone was positive Sean was being held within the walls of Dunstaffnage Castle. Gyllis would have believed it herself if she hadn't heard Alan MacCoul's threat.

She heaved on the oars, dragging them through the swells. Doubtless, it would take a Herculean effort to row four miles to Dunollie and then only heaven knew how much further. Gyllis gritted her teeth. Nothing would stop her, no matter if she had to row all day and night.

By the time she reached Dunollie, the sun had traversed to the late morning sky. She'd been rowing for at least two hours and her arms were sore. Her back and neck punished her like she'd climbed the tower stairs on her hands more than fifty times.

Rowing a heavy wooden skiff was hard work. Though the current was running southwest, she fought the swells to keep from being pushed toward the mainland.

Blisters had begun to form on her palms and she changed positions frequently to shift the pressure to different points on her hands. When the castle came into view, she paused her rowing, shaded her eyes and searched. True to Angus's word, an island loomed off the coast—quite a bit further away than she'd hoped. Through the haziness, the shore sloped up into green hills, allowing no clear view of its size. But one thing was certain, she had quite a bit more rowing to do.

Her entire body ached. Even if she weren't recovering from a bout of paralysis, she'd be tired. She dared glance at her palms. Three big blisters on her right hand and two on her left. *How in God's name will I make it?* She pulled an oatcake from the satchel and washed it down with a gulp of watered wine.

Again, Alan MacCoul's damning words rang in her head. "*I will imprison you in irons and laugh while your body rots in a dank and musty cave.*"

She blew on her palms and ground her teeth. "Damn you, Alan

MacCoul!" she yelled at the top of her voice. Gyllis steeled her mind to the searing pain, and with each pull of the oars, sailed closer to Kerrera.

Working against the current, the passage across the sound took twice as long to traverse as it had taken to row from Dunstaffnage to Dunollie. When Gyllis finally glimpsed a clear view of Kerrera's northernmost point, her hands were completely raw, she could hardly move her arms and the muscles in her back and neck burned and tortured her with every pull of the oars.

She scanned the shore and beyond for any sign of a cave. A narrow, beach transitioned into grassy, rolling hills, filled with purple heather and spotted with trees. Gyllis wanted to scream. There wasn't one rocky outcropping that looked like it might house a cave. To the east, the surf was rougher, angered by wind and dark clouds. Whitecaps topped the waves coming across from the Isle of Mull. The westward current would be even stronger and all the more difficult to navigate.

She could scarcely drag the oars through the protected waters from Dunstaffnage to Dunollie. She gazed at the shore with desperate longing. If only her legs were strong enough to traverse the sandy beach or the craggy land beyond, she'd pull ashore and allow her hands a rest—but as sure as she breathed, the boat would be faster than walking. What would she do if she hiked away from the skiff and her legs failed? She didn't even have one crutch and she'd left the old stick on the pier at Dunstaffnage.

After blowing on her palms to cool the burn, she grasped the oars and gave them a solid pull. Crying out, she snatched her hand into her body and crouched over it. Searing pain shot through her palm. Blood dripped onto her breeks. Opening her trembling fingers, the blisters had rubbed raw. Blood oozed across her palm and dribbled into the hull.

Tears streamed down her cheeks while she clutched her arms to her body and rocked. Why couldn't someone have trusted her? Why did the men believe they were so damned right? More tears welled, blurring her vision and making dark splashes on the coarse leather. Wailing, her voice box grated. Gyllis looked up at the ominous sky. What if she was wrong? What if she'd come all this way and Sean wasn't there? How would she make it back with her hands blistered and bleeding? If only someone would have believed her—tried to help, but instead they all looked upon her as if she were an invalid—a burden no one wanted.

What if this God-forsaken island wasn't even Kerrera? A shrill scream pealed through her throat.

“Where is he?” She rocked in place clutching her hands to her body, tears streaming from her eyes, her nose running. Desperate for answers, she shook her fist at the sky. “Damn you! Where. Is. He?”

Exhaustion claimed her mind. She wanted to curl up in the bottom of the skiff and let it drift. Perhaps it might run aground someplace where people were nice and helpful. She tugged on the oars and shrieked with pain. Her hands could take no more. Slapped by the relentless waves, the boat had drifted further away from the island’s beach.

“Sean, where are you?” she cried, slumping from the rowing bench into the hull. *I’m a complete and utter failure.* She gazed up at the black clouds and cursed at the heavens. “God in heaven, why will you not help me?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

"*You think I'm brave? My courage is nothing compared to yours. Before me I see a woman who will not be cut down by a devastating illness, who will look it in the face, grasp it with both hands and fight. Not only today, but every day you continue to fight, to work through your pain and agony so one day this will be behind you*."

Gyllis sat up with a start. She could have sworn she'd heard Sean's voice—or God's. More so, she remembered the words he'd spoken after she'd fallen at Dunollie. Only he believed in her strength. He believed she could overcome insurmountable odds.

But could she?

The boat teetered with the waves, the oars clicking in their locks. How long had she been wallowing in self-pity? How far had she drifted? She peered over the hull. The skiff had drifted toward the mainland, but a bit south, too. She could see the length of the island now—quite a long isle indeed.

But there was no time to think of that now.

Sean needed her.

While she drew in a stuttering breath, Gyllis stared at her shaking hands. Her pain did not matter. She would not allow anything to stop her. If the skin on her hands were to rub completely off, she would not stop. If the skies were to open with a deluge, she would not stop. If Duncan were to sail a fleet of galleys to find her, she would tell him to turn back because she would not stop until every last inch of Kerrera was searched for any sign of Sean.

Steeling her wits, Gyllis crawled back onto the rowing bench and wrapped her fingers around the oars. It stung, but she clenched her teeth and bore it. With every stroke of the oars, she grew bolder, pulled harder, worked though the aching agony in her limbs.

Thunder pealed from the west.

She ground her teeth and rowed.

A droplet of rain splashed her forehead and she threw her head back. "Bring forth your vengeance, oh God. I shall persevere like Job." She pulled again. *Why would God favor a man as evil as Alan MacCoul?*

She could think of no reason.

Another thunderclap resounded. Gyllis shifted her gaze to the darkening sky. "If you're listening to me, please help me find Sean. You may rain down on me with pellets of hail, but guide me to my love!"

Rain began to fall in sloppy droplets.

"Do you aim to forsake me?" she yelled at the top of her voice. "Is that why you turned me into a cripple?"

She scanned the shoreline. Still no sign of a cave.

On and on she continued to row until she rounded the southernmost point of the island. Once she crossed to the eastern shore, she'd be at the mercy of the storm and the stronger current.

Please. Help me.

The shoreline cut into a cove, exposing rocky cliffs—hidden both from the mainland and from the Isle of Mull to the east. Gyllis's heart fluttered. Her arms infused with renewed strength. Could she allow herself to hope? The skies opened with a deluge, the white-capped surf slapped against the skiff, making it bob precariously. Fighting, she rowed the little boat straight onto a sandy bank until it stopped.

She'd have to jump out into the water. But that didn't matter, she was already wet.

Cold water filled her boots as she splashed into the knee-deep surf. She wrapped the skiff's rope around her wrist and trudged onto the sandbank, pulling it with all her strength. The wooden hull was none too light, but it was her lifeline to the mainland. Who knew how long she'd be stranded if something happened to the skiff.

And what if I'm wrong?

With a heave, Gyllis dragged the boat out of the water and secured the rope around an enormous boulder, then slung the satchel over her shoulder.

Overhead, a buzzard squawked. Gyllis's shoulders tensed. Not but fifty paces away, an entire flock of the vile scavengers flew in a circular pattern.

Her heart flying to her throat, Gyllis stumbled toward the revolting birds. "No!" she gasped, trying to keep her footing on the slick ground. "I cannot be too late."

She reached the crest of a mound and saw it. Gaping like the mouth of a serpent, the cave could have passed for the entrance to Hades.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

She bent down, picked up a rock and threw it at the buzzards. "Go away!"

A bolt of lightning streaked into three fingers overhead. The buzzards screeched and scattered while thunder boomed so loudly, Gyllis crouched and wrapped her arms around her head. Moving as fast as she could, she stumbled toward the cave whilst the rain came down in sheets.

When she stepped inside, she stood against the wall, shivering. With quick inhales, she rubbed the outsides of her arms and peered into the dark cavern. All she could see was blackness. She pushed against her eyes, willing them to adjust to the dim light. Slowly she crept in deeper, sliding her feet, bracing one hand against the stone

wall.

"Sean?" Her voice warbled. "Are you here?"

She stood and listened, but the roar of the deluge outside resounded through the cave, so loud it was almost deafening. Reaching her free arm ahead, she continued on, sliding her feet over slick rocks.

The rain eased a bit.

"Sean?" she called, louder this time.

Through the dripping and splashing, Gyllis thought she heard a cough. She took another step. "Sean? Is that you?"

"Here," a faint voice rasped.

"God in heaven." Her stomach swarmed with fluttering butterflies. "'Tis you?"

Blinking, Gyllis focused on the source of the sound. She saw the outline of something bulky, immobile. *Is it?*

Hastening her step, she tried to run. Her toe caught on a rock and she stumbled forward. Straining to keep her balance, she crashed into the wall. "Blast it," she cursed, ignoring the pain radiating up her elbow, and again sliding her feet forward. *If I fall, I'll be no use to him at all.*

The cave brightened, as if there had been a break in the clouds. Then she saw him. Caged in irons like a criminal hanging from the Edinburgh Tolbooth. Stumbling, she made her way across the craggy ground while a sickly burn wrenched her insides.

Blessed Lord Jesus, what has Alan done? "I knew you were here." She grasped the iron bars and tugged…Nothing moved. The welds were immobile.

"Water," he rasped.

Sean's features were shrouded in blue shadows but the whites of his eyes were clear. They gazed at her like a starved and hunted fox. Quickly, Gyllis tugged the flagon from her satchel. "I've some watered wine."

She pulled out the cork and held it up and touched it to his lips through the bars. "I'll tip it now."

He opened his mouth and she eased the flagon up until she could hear him swallow. Then he sputtered and coughed.

She stoppered the flagon and set it down. "How can we free you from this contraption?"

"Bust…off the l-lock."

Heaven's stars, she'd never seen a man so weak. She rattled the cage and he groaned as if it caused unimaginable pain. "How?"

"Rock."

"But I could hurt you."

"Do it."

Gyllis found a good-sized rock and picked it up with both hands. She swallowed hard and faced him. The lock was a black, ugly thing. Her hands trembled as she lifted the stone and slammed it against the iron. The clang echoed throughout the cavern, but the lock held firm.

"Again," Sean growled.

She nodded and raised the stone. Hitting the lock over and over, Gyllis's exhausted arms burned. She cried out against the strain, but the blasted thing must have been hewn in the fires of hell. Stopping, she panted. "I-I will *not* fail."

"Easy lass." Sean moved a bit and rattled the irons. "Give me another tot afore you try again."

Gyllis winced when she reached for the flagon.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"'Tis nothing." She wasn't about to complain about her bleeding hands—not with Sean teetering on the brink of death. She held the flagon to his lips. "You mustn't drink too much, else your stomach might reject it."

He sipped without sputtering this time. "I'll be right."

She stoppered the flagon and picked up the rock. "Are you ready for me to give it another go?"

"Aye. Aim for the top of the loop. Any padlock will not withstand a direct blow."

She eyed the lock. "How did you know that?"

"I learned a thing or two serving in your father's enforcers." His voice sounded a wee bit better.

"You must tell me more soon." She raised the stone. "Where it bends, you say?"

"Hit it square."

Gyllis held her breath and smashed the rock downward. She let out a frustrated groan. "Damn this bloody thing to hell!" Roaring at the top of her lungs, she raised it over her head then slammed it atop the lock using her strength, her body and all the gut-wrenching fortitude she could muster. With a clang, the piece of metal dropped to the ground.

Squealing, Gyllis tugged on the grill. Though it was stiff, the hinges gave way with a screech. Sean fell to his knees, wrapping Gyllis in his arms and taking her down with him. "I've never been so weak." His hand covered his eyes. "I'm a bloody mess."

"How long has it been since you've had food or water?"

"Three days, I think." He swayed in her arms.

She smoothed her hand over his stubbled beard. "My God. 'Tis a wonder you're alive."

He leaned against her—his weight much heavier than she could have imagined. "I cannot believe you found me." He rocked back on

his haunches and averted his face. “I am hideous.”

Gyllis clasped his cheeks with the tips of her fingers and offered a trembling smile. “Nay, nay, nay. You are *alive*.”

He focused on her eyes with an intense stare. “You are an angel sent from God,” he whispered, his voice dead-level and heartfelt.

Gyllis gasped, holding back her urge to cry, pulled him close and clung to him for dear life. For the rest of her life she’d be atoning for all the cursing she did in the boat. “No one would listen to me, but Alan’s bitter words replayed in my head over and over.”

“When he threatened me at Beltane?”

“Aye, I’ll never forget the hatred in his voice.”

“Those words have haunted me these past days.” Sean rested his head on her shoulder—as if he needed her. Gyllis’s heart swelled. She’d been needy for so long, to have someone need her made gooseflesh spread across her skin. She ran her hand over his head, never wanting to release him.

“He’s my brother.”

She took in a quick inhale of air. “What?”

“MacCoul.”

She gently ran a hand over his hair. “I always thought he was a bastard.”

“He was…is. But he’s my father’s son. My father supported him all along but never revealed his secret.” Sean reached for the flagon, his movement sluggish and awkward.

Gyllis pulled off the stopper. “So that’s why Alan is so bitter.”

“Aye.” Sean guzzled the watered wine. “He not only thinks he should be Chieftain of Dunollie, he aims to claim the Lordship of Lorn for himself.”

“No.” She tensed. “He’s insane.”

“Insane with hate.” He straightened and grasped her shoulder. “I must stop him.”

“He’s seized Dunstaffnage Castle. Duncan and the men are trying to attack, but Alan has amassed an army.”

“I must hurry.”

“You’re on the ragged edge of death. How can you think about going after him now?”

Sean sat on his haunches. “With a bit of food and a few tots of whisky I’ll come good.” He pointed to her satchel. “Have you got anything to eat in there?”

“I’ve some oatcakes, but that’s all.”

“’Tis a start.”

She reached for the bag and inclined her head toward the light. The rain had subsided, but droplets splashed down in rapid succession from the cave’s entrance. “Let us move away from the stench.”

“I’m afraid only a bath will help us there.” He used the wall for balance and chuckled. “My legs are as wobbly as a newborn lamb’s.”

“I ken how that feels.”

Both limping, she led him to a flat boulder where they’d be able to sit and she could see him better. When the light illuminated his skin, she clapped a hand over her mouth. “My God, where are your clothes?”

Sean grimaced. “I’m surprised the bastard left me braies and boots on.”

She focused on the sores peppering his flesh. “What did he do?”

“Blacksmith’s rivets bored holes through my skin. He not only wanted me to die, he wanted me to suffer as long as possible.”

“The fiendish blackguard.”

“Wheesht, Gyllis. I’ve never heard you use such a vulgar tongue.”

She rubbed her aching arms. “Apologies. I’m a bit on edge. No one would listen to me about Alan’s curse. Duncan tried to send me back to Kilchurn. Angus swore you were being held in the castle dungeon—not even he would listen to the reasoning of a crippled woman.”

“How did you find me?”

“Angus mentioned Kerrera was part of the Dunollie lands. I took a skiff from the pier and refused to stop rowing until I found a cave. If I had to cover every square inch of Kerrera, I would have done it.”

“My God, you are an amazing woman.” He grasped her hand and kissed it. “You are my very own guardian angel.” He slid his hand to her upper arm. “You rowed all the way from Dunstaffnage without assistance?”

She closed her eyes as his fingers kneaded her aching muscles. “I do not ken how I did it. If it weren’t for my determination to find you, I would not have been able to continue past Dunollie.”

His hand stopped. “Why are you wearing breeks?”

She chuckled and looked down. She’d forgotten about her clothing. Biting her bottom lip, she gave him a sheepish smile. “They’re Duncan’s. I couldn’t very well slip away from Kilchurn in the dead of night dressed like a lass.”

“You did?” He knitted his brows. “You could have been killed.”

She reached inside the satchel and pulled out the remaining oatcakes. “You would have done the same for me.”

“Aye, but I’m a man.”

“So does that make me any less a person?”

“No, lass.” He shoved a crunchy cake into his mouth. “You’ve proven that it most certainly does not.”

Gyllis blew on her palms.

Sean leaned in and examined them. “Christ almighty, your skin is raw.”

“I told you I wasn’t about to stop.”

He hissed. “Bloody hell. I still cannot believe you suffered so much for me.”

“But I love you.” She blinked back her tears. “I would have moved heaven and hell to save you.”

He brushed his fingers along her cheek. “I believe you would have.”

There was nothing Gyllis wanted more than to wrap him in her arms and smother him with kisses, but he was so weak and needed a bath. He’d require more than a few drops of watered wine and a handful of oatcakes. “Lady Meg is at Dunstaffnage. She can tend your wounds.”

“Dunollie is closer. Jinny will set me to rights and I can gather my weapons and clean clothing.”

“Weapons? You are not planning to fight…”

“Bloody oath I am. I’ll not rest until Alan is brought to justice.” He cradled his head in his hands as if it pained him. “If he’d told me he was my brother I would have honored my father’s wishes and given him land and coin, but now there is no turning back for him.”

“Aye, he must be caught and sent to the gallows, but let Duncan lead the charge.”

“And lick my wounds like a miserable coward?” He tried to stand, but dropped back. “I will not sit idle while other men risk their lives for me.”

Since he’d taken a wee bit of sustenance, a dangerous fire flickered in Sean’s eyes.

Gyllis held his stare. She would not lose him. Not ever again. “But first you must promise we’ll go to Dunollie and find your healer. I doubt you could raise your sword at the moment, let alone face Alan.”

“Agreed. But I will regain my strength. Make no bones about it.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

By the time they left the cave on Kerrera, the sun had begun to set. It would be dark before they reached Dunollie. Sean was almost relieved—almost. In no way would he allow Gyllis to row the skiff up the shore. Every fiber in his body ached. His mind was clouded by pain, starvation and thirst. God help him, he'd even swooned a time or two.

They'd filled the flagon with water from a spring, but his thirst would not be assuaged. His stomach rumbled. A few oatcakes made little impact and his fingers shook. Bloody hell, he could barely propel the boat in the seas, given the storm's effect and his trembling limbs.

Gyllis sat on the bench across from him, her eyes filled with adoration, even in his wretchedness. In no way could he fail her. She alone was the source of his motivation to continue on. The fascinating woman had singlehandedly overcome insurmountable odds to come to his rescue. He loved her before, but now his respect for her soared to a new level. He would love her through eternity. That her beauty outshone any lass in Scotland no longer mattered. If she were to turn grey with age on the morrow, he would love her no less.

When he at last moored the skiff at the embankment, he couldn't be certain who helped whom more, but somehow they managed to make it up the trail to the keep. The old guard, Cadan, ran to meet them, weapons clanking. "M'laird, you look as if you've been to hell and back."

Sean smirked. "I have." With Gyllis under his arm they hobbled toward the stairwell. "Send Jinny up with food and a salve." He stopped and regarded the guard over his shoulder. "Order a bath. I ride at dawn."

"Dawn, m'laird?" The guard stood dumbfounded. "In your condition?"

"Do as I say," Sean bellowed. "Make it quick. I cannot bear the stench of my own flesh."

Gyllis stumbled on a step, but held on. "I daresay Cadan may be right. 'Tis madness to ride when you're in such a state."

"Do not worry. After a good meal, a bath and a sleep, I'll be fit." His thighs burned with every step. Why in God's name did his chamber have to be on the third floor?

"We're nearly there," Gyllis said as if she'd heard his thoughts. "A meal will help us both I'd reckon."

After they pushed through the door, Gyllis didn't release him until she'd led him to the bed. "You'd best rest here until the healer comes."

He sat. "I hate weakness."

“As do I.” She set to lighting a candle with the flint. “Now you have an inkling of what it was like to be confined with paralysis for months.”

It wasn’t that he hadn’t thought about it, but her words hit a chord. How unconscionably difficult things must have been for her. Yes, he’d known she was suffering, but had no idea of the depth of that pain…until now. “Come here.” He pulled her into him and wrapped his arms around her waist, pressing his ear to her breast. Her heart beat a steady rhythm “You are the strongest person I know—stronger than any man. If only I could have an iota of your strength.”

She cradled his head in her hand. “You do. Can you not see it? If you had not inner strength, you would not have survived in that dank cave with all those lesions on your body.”

The door opened and Sean swallowed down the lump in his throat. He would have preferred it if Jinny had taken a bit longer. Followed by a serving girl who was carrying a trencher of food, the healer walked to the bed with her medicine basket.

Sean begrudgingly released Gyllis’s waist while Jinny set her things on the bedside table. “Thanks be to God, you are safe, m’laird.” She glanced sidewise at Gyllis.

Sean gestured with his hand. “You remember Miss Gyllis Campbell. If it weren’t for her, I would have perished this night in the Kerrera cave.”

“Kerrera?” Jinny glanced between them. “But everyone thinks Alan MacCoul is holding you in the Dunstaffnage dungeon.”

“Everyone but me,” Gyllis said, nodding at the matron. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, matron.”

Jinny remembered her manners and curtsied. “My thanks, miss.” Then her eyes popped when she looked Sean head to toe. “Forgive me for saying so m’laird, but you look as if you’re half dead.”

“’Tis exactly how I feel.”

She looked closely at Sean’s lesions and then sniffed. “These have started to fester.”

Gyllis blew on her palms. “The conditions in the cave were deplorable.”

Jinny fished in her basket and pulled out a pot. “My salve will fix you up.”

Sean jolted and hissed as she attacked the first sore. The woman’s bloody ointment stung like a posy of nettles, but it worked—eventually. He clenched his fists and took the rest of her ministrations without any outward display of pain. He wouldn’t be any sort of man showing weakness in front of Gyllis, not after she’d borne so much agony herself.

Jinny wiped her fingers on a cloth and stoppered her pot. “That

ought to see you through to the morrow. Shall I bring up a tonic to help you sleep?"

"I should be fine with a tot or two of whisky." He reached for Gyllis's elbow and held up one of her hands. "The lady's palms could use a bit of your salve as well."

Jinny gasped. "My Lord, what on earth did you do?"

Gyllis shrugged and blushed. "I rowed a skiff from Dunstaffnage to the southern end of Kerrera."

"Blessed be the saints, and you being a noble lassie and all." She shot a concerned look at Sean. "Why did the men not help her?"

"They didn't believe me." Gyllis cleared her throat. Aye, the lass could speak for herself. "They tried to send me back to Kilchurn."

Jinny slipped the cork off the pot and dug in her fingers. "Is that why you're wearing a pair of men's breeks?"

The color in Gyllis's cheeks deepened. "Aye, matron." She pursed her lips and glanced at Sean, making it clear she didn't intend to relate the whole story. Sean figured she ought to because the tale alone proved how strong-willed and determined Gyllis was.

Cadan pushed through the door, carrying a wooden bath, followed by a pair of stable boys laden with buckets of water.

"Careful not to slosh on the floor," Sean said. Normally he wouldn't pay a rat's attention to whether they spilled a bit of water or not, but wet floorboards could be slippery for Gyllis.

Cadan placed the basin in front of the hearth. "Shall I light the fire, m'laird?"

"Aye, thank you."

Jinny frowned. "I suppose I'd best leave the salve here if you intend to wash it off."

Sean gave her a wink. "That's a good lass."

She didn't even try to feign a smile. "Miss Gyllis, you can come with me and we'll find you a proper bed."

Gyllis shot a panicked stare to Sean.

He stood with his fists on his hips. Heaven help him, he was still weak-kneed and dizzy. "I'll see Miss Gyllis to the lady's chamber. I've a word to have with her first."

By the way she crossed her arms and pursed her lips, Jinny didn't approve. "Pardon me for saying so, but you both need your rest."

Sean gave her his sternest look. "That will be all, Jinny."

She ticked up her chin. "Very well, m'laird. Do you require anything else?"

"I've a terrible thirst. Could you send up a ewer of ale?"

Jinny gestured to the table with the food. "The chambermaid brought one up with the trencher."

Sean spotted it and grinned. "That she did."

“Come, Cadan,” Jinny said. “Let us leave our chieftain to his *rest* before he succumbs to exhaustion.”

Sean waited until the door closed behind the servants. God he was tired, but he could smell Gyllis’s allure from across the room. His mouth watered. He wasn’t sure if it was hunger for her or hunger for food, but when his stomach growled he chose the latter. For now. “I ken I need a bath, but that food looks too good to pass by. If I do not get a good meal in my belly soon, I fear my strength will never return.”

“Agreed, I’m famished.” She looked at the door and twisted her mouth. “Your healer must think me a harlot.”

“Do not worry about Jinny. I shall ensure her priorities are set straight at my next opportunity.” Sean lumbered to the table and held the chair for Gyllis.

“My thanks, but I should be holding the chair for you. Jinny was right when she said you looked like you were on death’s door. I’ve never seen anyone so pale.”

Sean slid into the chair across from her, suddenly feeling twice his age, perhaps even thrice. He reached for a slice of roast lamb and shoved it in his mouth. “I’ll be fit once I have something substantial in my belly.”

She picked up the ewer and served his tankard first. “I’m sure food will help.” She poured for herself. “But so will rest.”

He raised his ale. “Then ’tis settled. We shall eat, bathe and then rest.” He glanced at the bed, certain his idea of rest did not meet with Gyllis’s, but he’d cross that bridge when he came to it.

“We shall eat, but you will bathe, not I.”

“Only me?” He popped a grape in his mouth. The food must be helping because he grew more amorous by the moment. He inhaled deeply. “What the devil fragrance are you wearing? It’s making the pulse thrum beneath my skin.”

Her tongue shot out and she licked those delectable, pouty lips. “You must be mistaken. I’ve not applied a fragrance, especially dressed in men’s clothing.”

He reached across and ran his finger over the back of her hand. “Then it must be entirely your allure, m’lady.”

She smiled, her dimples dipping into a lovely blush. “I should leave you to your bath. ’Tis not proper for me to remain in your chamber—especially when the servants are aware of my presence.”

Sean puzzled at her shyness. “Do not think on Jinny’s dour frown. ’Tis none of her concern what we do within this chamber.”

“But rumors will spread—’tis different from the last time. Jinny had a bairn to deliver and I was appointed another chamber by Angus.”

He reached across the table and cupped her face in his palm. “As long as you remain in Dunollie, your reputation is safe. I’ll not stand for anyone sullying your name. Besides, as far as anyone is aware, you are staying in the lady’s chamber.”

Gyllis lowered her chin and looked up with the coyest of stares. “Very well—if you are certain.”

He took a bite of cold roast lamb. “I am.”

She raised her eyebrows and glanced toward the bath. “Then I should like to wash your back.” Honest to God, what a change his promise had brought about.

Sean stopped mid-chew. His mind went blank. His hunger fled. His cock lengthened. And then he swallowed. “I would be bathed by no finer hands than yours, m’lady.”

“I believe the fire has warmed the air enough for you not to catch a chill.”

“Quite right.” Not that chilly Scottish air ever bothered him. After shoving a bite of bread in his mouth, he stood and moved to the bath. Untying the braies, he let them drop to the floor. The heat of her gaze seared his back. He knew Gyllis as a passionate woman. Her earlier embarrassment had been a fear of gossip by the servants, not a fear of him. Sean wanted her to see him naked. He pivoted and faced her.

Her gaze raked down his body, lowering to his manhood, Gyllis gasped.

Even on the brink of exhaustion, his cock was hard.

He tapped his top lip with his tongue, anticipating her hands around his cock. Absently, his hand snuck down and he stroked himself. “I want you, lass.”

Gyllis’s green eyes sparkled as she inclined her head toward the tub and waited for him to climb in. She was right. He did need to bathe first. Unfortunately, the damned barrel wasn’t large enough to pull her in. She removed her cloak and sauntered forward. Her limp hardly noticeable, she’d come so far since she was stricken.

Picking up the cake of soap with the tips of her fingers, she held it to her nose. “Mm. Rose.”

Sean’s flesh tingled with anticipation as she knelt beside the basin. His voice box was too thick to speak.

She dipped the soap in the water and with her first touch, Sean shuddered. He closed his eyes and moaned.

“Shall I cleanse your back first?”

“Aye,” he rasped.

“I’ll be careful to avoid your sores.”

He’d scarcely felt the lesions when he’d slipped into the tepid water.

Gyllis smoothed a soapy hand over his shoulder.

Never in his life had he experienced a touch so ethereal. Her fingers plied his skin with light swirls, making his skin come to life and his blood pulse. Giving in to her heavenly ministrations, the tension shed from Sean's shoulders in concert with the water trickling down his chest and back.

Gyllis scooted forward, her face only inches from his. "Shall I cleanse the rest?"

Yes, for the love of everything holy, yes. "Aye," was all he could manage to utter.

Gyllis lathered the cake of soap. "I can be more careful when I use my fingers."

Sean needed those deft fingers plying him now. "Feels like heaven."

She tickled his chest and swirled her fingers around his nipples, leaning so close her wild, sensuous scent overpowered the rose in the soap. Sean's cock grew a mind of its own. It had been hovering just below the water, but it jutted through the surface, so hard it tapped his stomach.

A groan rumbled through his chest while Gyllis continued lower. He couldn't see her face, but he felt her eyes boring into his erection while her hands continued lower. Her touch became torturous as she bathed everything but his member, continuing to swirl her fingers around the sensitive skin on his inner thighs.

The further her hands got from his cock, the more he craved them to stroke it and free him from the hot, aching, yet exhilarating tension in his groin.

Sean realized he'd leaned his head back and closed his eyes, when she stopped.

Gyllis cleared her throat. "S-shall I wash you *there* too?" Her voice had taken on an erotically husky tone. The state of his arousal had affected her more than he'd realized, making his need all the more intense.

"Pleeeeease."

Slowly she lathered the soap between her fingers. Her braid swung around from her back. Sean grasped it and tugged off the thong at the end. Before she set the soap down, he had her hair released. The chestnut flickered with coppery highlights from the glow of the fire.

Their gazes collided as if steam erupted between them. Sean held his breath. Gyllis's lips parted and she released a stuttered exhale, her stare drifting down his body until it met with his cock.

Sean groaned before her slender fingers wrapped around him. She stroked him with such a feathery caress, he thought his heart would blast to the rafters. He realized he must have moaned when she asked him if she was hurting him.

“Nay,” he managed through clenched teeth. “Grip harder.”

With two more strokes, Sean could take no more. Either she would bring him undone or he would need to quell his burning desire and make this moment last. With a guttural growl he pulled her into the bath and smothered her mouth with his.

Holding her pliable body in his arms made his tension thrum to the surface. He devoured her mouth, claiming her face with his hands, probing his tongue deep inside with a bone melting fire that spread through his blood. Melting into his arms, she returned his fervor, matching his intensity with her own muffled mewls. Her kisses spread through his soul and claimed his heart, while gradually she took control and slowed their pace.

Gyllis licked his tongue like no one ever had before with languid brushes as if she’d been practiced in the art of kissing for a lifetime. Her lips wandered across his chin and down his neck—long, slow kisses that consumed his mind. Rather than releasing his tension, what he thought could not grow more intense compounded his need to possess her.

She clamped onto his shoulders and smoothed her hands down his arms, her sweet breath caressing his chest. “I want you.” She gripped her fingers tighter. “I ken I should let you rest, but I cannot quell the longing in my soul.”

After one last claiming kiss, Sean gathered her in his arms and stood, clenching his thighs to steady his weakened muscles. Dripping with water, he stepped out of the bath and set her on her feet beside the fire. “You’re all wet,” he said, his brogue taking on the most basal burr.

He stepped back to untie her laces and her gaze again floated down his body. He liked the way she looked at him with her eyes growing dark.

Then he pulled her shirt over her head and cast it aside. His breathing sped as he untied the cord around her waist and let the oversized breeks drop to the floorboards.

He couldn’t help his chuckle as the hem of her shift dropped to the floor, the garment wrinkled. “I cannot believe you shoved your shift into your breeks.”

“I was in a wee hurry.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Besides, it filled up the extra space inside.”

He sauntered toward her and untied the frilly ribbon around the neckline. “Not to worry. A shift can easily be removed.”

Gyllis’s giggle was barely audible as she raised her arms. Sean needed no more encouragement. In one swift move he pulled the garment over her head and tossed it over the chair.

Her hands again crossed over her breasts. He grasped them with a

gentle tug. “You’ve no reason to be bashful, lass. Allow me to gaze upon your beauty.”

She let him pull her arms away. Light from the fire and candles radiated across her flawless skin—he’d never seen her in the light before. A gasp strained in his throat. He’d thought he’d seen perfection, but now without a doubt, he gazed on the most miraculously bonny woman in all the world. Not only was the face lovelier than a porcelain doll, Gyllis had a slender neck with graceful shoulders to match. But her breasts took his breath away. In the golden light, the lush handfuls of ivory flesh were tipped by pink buds that made his mouth water.

He cupped them in his hands and kneaded. Her moan rekindled the raging fire in his groin. He’d not last long, but first he had to taste her flesh. When he took her nipple into his mouth, she leaned into him with a shuttering moan. God, her voice alone could bring him undone. It spurred him into a frenzy as he plied her breasts with one hand and suckled with his tongue.

“Please,” she begged. “Sean, I cannot take much more.”

The pleading tone of her voice attacked his overwhelming need with such force, his cock pulsed. He couldn’t take more either. Sweeping her into his arms, he pulled her into his chest and strode to the bed, droplets of water still streaming from his body.

When he set her down, she scooted against the pillows and spread her long legs, revealing the pink diamond of flesh he desired to enter with his ever fiber. She rocked her hips forward. “Please. I need you.”

He climbed over her, his cock straining to take her. But he wanted to make it slow, see to her needs—if he rode her like an alehouse tart, he might come before she reached her release. No. He’d see to her satisfaction first. Bracing his body over her, he slid his hand down her belly and tickled the tufts of hair that concealed her secret treasure. When his finger slid over her tiny button, she arched her back and cried out. “Please!”

Sean covered her mouth with a languid kiss while he slid a finger inside her core. Her moan rumbled through his entire body. He had now taken control, but the movement of her hips circling around his finger brought on a renewed surge of blinding want. In and out he slid his finger while his thumb caressed her pearl. Her breathing sped. She was close. He wanted to peak with her.

But Sean continued on until she arched her back and clawed at him. “Sean, please.”

With a growl, he grasped himself and slid inside.

Gyllis’s eyes flew open. “All the way.”

He moaned, so close to spilling, he didn’t know if he could make it to her length. He clenched his muscles and pushed through her slick

sheath. “My God, you are delectable.”

Relentless, she sank her fingers into his buttocks and demanded he thrust. Her gasps of breath grew louder. Sean could control the pace no longer. Giving in to the thrill of their joining, he allowed her to dictate the tempo with her demanding fingers tugging his buttocks. She cried out, reaching her peak. The liquid heat gushing around him had him enraptured, the fire in his groin had never burned so hot. Over and over, he thrust deep inside her until stars crossed his vision. Shattering through the precipice of ecstasy, his seed burst.

Powerless to pull out this time, he filled her, and by God did he intend to claim her for his own. The woman beneath him would be his wife, even if he had to face every last Campbell in Argyllshire.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After the most amazing experience of her life, Gyllis had fallen asleep cradled in Sean's arms. She'd thought nothing could top the last time they'd made love, but oh, how wrong she'd been. And how on earth was Sean able to be so virile after all he'd endured?

She, too, had been exhausted, yet exhilarated at the same time. She sensed the same raw passion in him, driving him to the point of release. Together nothing could stand in the way of their love. They were made to be together. Their souls were one.

Destiny had to be the only reason Sean had fallen in love with her—a cripple. It was almost as if he *needed* to protect her. He'd always handled her as if she were as fragile as a bird. Yet he made love to her with the sort of raw passion she'd seen from him when he sparred in the courtyard. Sean MacDougall would not be bested—not in the bedchamber—and not by the sword. He was solid Highlander through and through. Without an ounce of fat, his muscles were sculpted like the pictures of Greek statuary she'd seen in books. He was an Adonis and he was hers.

As Gyllis woke, she snuggled into the bedclothes and released a satisfied sigh. So satiated with love, she could spend the entire day abed. She moved her foot back to interlace it with Sean's leg, but was met with cold linens. Opening her eyes, she peered across the dim room and found herself alone.

She moved her hand over the spot where Sean had slept. *Cold.*

The bed rattled as she clutched the bedclothes under her chin and sat up. Sean was nowhere to be found, though a fire crackled in the hearth and her clothes were neatly stacked on the table beside last evening's meal.

She exhaled. At least the servants hadn't come in and found her in the chieftain's bed. *Goodness, I'd be mortified.* She wrapped herself in a blanket, crossed the floor and locked the door—Sean could knock when he returned.

Stretching, her entire body ached. She looked at her blistered palms, now crusty with scabs. Her arms and shoulders punished her most of all. She tried to raise them above her head and her muscles ached worse than they did at the height of her paralysis. But she knew rowing all that way would take its toll. Rubbing her neck, she vowed not to let a few sore muscles put a damper on her euphoria.

After pulling on her breeks and shirt, she splashed her face at the basin and used some mint to clean her teeth. She hissed at the pain when the water seeped over her palms. Last night she'd been too numb to notice the pain overmuch. A pair of leather gloves rested

beside the basin, and she slid them on, stretching out the fingers. They were big, but the doeskin would protect her skin from further injury.

She moved to the window and pulled the furs aside, clammy chills coursed over her skin, and it hadn't been caused by the breeze. No longer dawn, the hour was later than she'd thought.

Sean's gone to face Alan.

As fast as her legs would allow, she dashed to the table, picked up the remaining bread and shoved it in her satchel.

Why did he not wake me? She pushed out the door and headed down the stairwell only to be met by Jinny.

"Good morrow, Miss Gyllis." The woman sounded chipper for someone who most likely thought her a harlot.

But Gyllis kept herself guarded. Scanning the great hall, her fears were confirmed. Sean was nowhere to be seen. She dipped her head respectfully. "Good morrow. Has Sir Sean left for Dunstaffnage?"

"Aye. He rode out before dawn."

"*Before*?" Gyllis clutched her satchel to her chest. "Bless it, he was on the brink of death."

She folded her hands at her waist. "There's no need to tell me how stubborn our chieftain is. He's been the same since he was a bairn."

"You knew him as a babe?"

"Aye, always the adventurer, that lad."

"Evidently some things never change." Gyllis headed toward the big double doors. "Since he did not wait for me, I must travel to the castle alone."

Jinny hastened beside her. "He mentioned you might not want to remain behind."

"Oh did he now?"

"Aye." The woman had the gall to wink. "And he told me you'll be the lady of the keep right here at Dunollie soon."

Gyllis stopped. "He said that?"

"Aye. Honestly, I'd never thought the lad would set his eyes on just one lass, but ever since he returned from the borders, I swear, he's not looked at another woman."

Gyllis knew Sean had a reputation for liking the lassies, but would have preferred if it were a little known secret. She cringed.

"Do not worry yourself." Jinny patted her hand. "When a woman catches a wandering man's heart, he's changed for good."

She nodded, preferring not to pursue the conversation further. There were many things that needed to be settled before Sean could make an official proposal, the first being he survives this day. "I need the lend of a horse."

"I'll send for Cadan. He'll escort you."

Gyllis spread her gloved palms to her sides. "You're not going to

try to stop me?"

"Sir Sean told me to keep you occupied." Jinny grinned broadly. "But I kent a woman who'd recently suffered a bout of paralysis and practically rowed the whole coast of Argyllshire to singlehandedly rescue the Chieftain of Dunollie would not be content to stay behind and roll the dough for an apple tart."

A chill tickled Gyllis's shoulders. She'd found an ally right there at Dunollie—someone who understood her. She grasped Jinny's hands between her fingers. "Thank the Lord you understand. Please have Cadan meet me at the stables. I've already frittered away enough time."

Alan MacCoul sat in Dunstaffnage's second-floor solar alone and sipped a dram of whisky. The early hour could be damned—he needed a drink. He hated waiting, and the longer he waited, the testier his men grew. He'd promised them riches and knighthoods. The final seal of success was so near he could taste it. If only the king's reply would arrive, he could end this bloody siege and his power would be recognized. At last people would bow to him, honor him.

The standoff had intensified. More clan armies were arriving, and every day Alan's odds decreased. In addition to the daily volleys of arrows, Campbell's men had broken through the outer barbican walls. Now Alan held the inner courtyard, the towers and keep. But the person sitting in the king's solar had the power. *He* had the power. Stationed on the battlements, his men weren't forced to be spread out, a good vantage point to battle a larger army if it came to a fight. Alan was still in control. Besides, their numbers would be more effective from the inner curtain wall. But Alan didn't like being squeezed. And the bastards down below would pay with their heads when the king gave him due recognition.

Brus pushed through the door. "We'll be out of foodstuffs within two days."

That was another thing that had Alan on edge. The livestock were all housed in the outer barbican and beyond. His two hundred men were stuck with the rotting food in the cellar. Alan tossed back his whisky and gave the insolent cur a sneer. "Wheesht. This will be over before the stores run out." *By God, it had better be*.

Trevor filed in behind Brus. "By my account, we'll be out of arrows by morning."

Alan shoved back his chair and clapped his palms on the table. "You imbeciles. Can you not think for yourselves?" He leaned forward. "What about the arrows they're firing at us?"

"Most are hitting the wall and dropping. We're firing far more than we're reclaiming."

"*My lord*," Alan emphasized. "I *will* be shown my due respect."

The two men exchanged glances.

"I saw that." Alan barreled around the table and drew his dirk. "Do either of you question my rightful heritage? If you do, I'd gladly prove it here and now."

Trevor held up his hands. "N-no m'laird. Both of us have stood beside you through bad times and good."

"Aye," Brus agreed.

"But there's one more thing." Trevor took a step back. "Campbell's dragons are moving cannons through the outer barbican. They aim to blast the castle to hell."

Alan spun around and kicked over a chair. With all his strength, he slammed his dirk into the table. "The bastard thinks he can attack me with cannons?"

Trevor and Brus stared at him, both red in the face. They should be on bended knee, bowing their heads. Alan tried to yank the dirk from the table, but he'd slammed it so hard, the blasted thing held firm. With both hands, he bore down and wrested it out, then he turned and threw it at a portrait of King James.

"Where is that fool-born messenger? The king will approve my claim on Dunollie and name me the Lord of Lorn. *I alone* hold Dunstaffnage, Scotland's gateway to the Hebrides. I have held off the pompous Duncan Campbell and his cowardly Highland Enforcers. I have shown the king exactly who should be lord of these lands. I am the firstborn son of the great Alan MacDougall, not Sean. I am the true heir, descended directly from the sovereign Somerled, king and founder of this land."

"Aye, you are the heir." Brus bowed. "We're in your service. Of that you'll never need to question…ah…m'lord…if you'll excuse us, m'lord…"

Alan shook his finger. "My name shall be feared throughout the Highlands."

The men backed out of the door, but Alan followed them, his finger held high. "Now that I have disposed of the usurping Chieftain of Dunollie, the egotistical Lord of Glenorchy will bow to *me*!"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Wearing a hood low over his brow and outfitted with his old weapons, Sean dismounted outside the tent flying the MacDougall pennant. Still early morning, the men in the camp had only begun to stir. Sean watched Angus push out the flap and hobble to a bush to relieve himself. More grunts and flatulence came from the old man than Sean had witnessed from the whole band of Highland Enforcers when they were on the trail.

Sean tugged his linen shirt away from his skin. The sores riddling his body were still raw, but he'd steel his mind to the pain. It wasn't the first time he'd ignored his wounds to face the devil. He doubted it would be his last.

Sean chuckled to himself and skirted around the tent. No use making an announcement of his presence. If he did, he'd lose the fabled *ghost* moniker, something he wasn't yet ready to part with.

He peered from the corner to find Angus still releasing his water. *Bloody hell, will the man go on all morning?* Silently, Sean slipped behind him and whispered in his ear. "We'll not allow my father's bastard to kick up his heels in the king's castle for one more day."

Blanching pure white, Angus's entire body convulsed as he dropped the hem of his surcoat and reached for his dirk.

Sean clamped ahold of Angus's wrist before the henchman did something rash. "Hold onto your braies, friend."

Angus sucked in a gasp. "M'laird? You escaped?"

"Kerrera, aye."

"Kerrera? But I thought…everyone thought."

"I ken what you group of bull-minded battlers thought, and if it hadn't been for Miss Gyllis's strong-willed determination, I'd be dead by now."

Angus shoved his dirk into its scabbard. "Jesus Christ, she asked for my assistance and I told her to go away home."

"Aye, just like her brother and every other miserable knight she asked for help."

Angus spread his hands to his sides. "I didn't intend—"

"I expect you to apologize to the lady later." Sean again tugged his shirt away from his skin to ease the burn from his lesions. "Where is Lord Duncan?"

Angus pointed toward the barbican. "We took the inner bailey. He's set up command in the guardhouse tower."

Sean shook his head. "I cannot believe we haven't yet driven them out."

"MacCoul has amassed quite an army. We estimate two hundred or

more."

Sean headed toward the barbican gates. "How the hell did that scum-sucking weasel manage to find that many men to follow him?"

"Well." Angus twisted his mouth. "Between you, Campbell, and the king, I do not think it would be difficult."

Sean stopped and ran his palm over his dirk. "Pardon? Your words border on treason."

"Forgive me, m'laird." Angus bowed. "'Twas not my intent. I'll die defending you and Clan MacDougall, but all the outlaws we've evicted—all the work you and Lord Campbell have done in the name of the king—good deeds, mind you. But any time you take up the sword and enforce the law of the land, someone's going to feel slighted."

"Och aye, you're right there." Sean clapped him on the back. "Tell me, what else does Duncan have planned for my father's bastard?"

Angus cringed as if Sean's words had just sunk in. "Alan told you did he?"

"Aye. Had I known, all this mightn't have happened." Sean tugged on his hood to ensure his face was still hidden. "I would have at least tried to talk with him, give him his due."

"It seems the past has come to haunt me. I beg your forgiveness, m'laird. I made a promise to your father on his deathbed—vowed I would never reveal his secret." Angus stopped. "But there is one promise I broke."

"What's that?"

"When you figured out the coffers were being skimmed, I told Murdach I'd have no part in it. Your father wanted to keep his mistake a secret, but once you became chieftain, we had no right to continue sending MacCoul coin. Especially after you'd banished him."

"I ken." Sean continued on toward the gatehouse. "I overheard you saying as much to Murdach. 'Tis why your head's still attached to your neck."

Angus's Adam's apple bobbed as his hawk-like gaze met Sean's in silent thanks. They walked past the guard and ascended up the stairwell.

"Duncan's shipped the cannons down from Castle Stalker," Angus said loud enough to be heard over their echoing footsteps.

Sean exited on the first landing—he'd visited this guardhouse enough times to know where Duncan would be located. "Bloody hell," he mumbled under his breath. MacCoul had certainly dug himself in. *Let's see how long it will take to ferret him out*.

Duncan looked up from a map of the castle. His jaw dropped and he blanched as white as Angus had earlier. "By God, now I know you're a ghost."

Sean grinned. There was nothing more satisfying than confounding

the leader of the Highland Enforcers. “Good to see you as well, m’lord.”

“How the bloody hell did you get away? We haven’t fired the cannons because I did not want to take a chance before we spirited you out.” The corner of his mouth ticked up. “Not yet anyway.”

Sean pulled up a chair and reclined with his knees wide. “Bloody MacCoul chained me in irons and left me to rot in a cave on Kerrera.”

Duncan’s jaw dropped. “My God, Gyllis was right.”

Angus stepped behind Sean. “Exactly what I said m’lord.”

Sean relayed the story of how Gyllis had found him on the brink of death—after receiving savage hospitality from his bastard brother. He held up his shirt. “No thanks to MacCoul’s smithy.”

Duncan hissed. “You should have Lady Meg see to that.” Then his face went dark and his eyebrows knit together. “God’s teeth, Gyllis was supposed to be assisting my wife this whole time.” He cracked his knuckles. “When I get my hands on my wayward sister I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Sean leaned forward. “No one would listen to Gyllis except your lady wife. If the lass had allowed you to ship her back to Kilchurn, the buzzards would be feasting on my eyeballs this morn.”

“Jesus.” Duncan plopped into his chair. “But witnesses saw him cart your body into the castle.”

Sean reflected back to the cave. “He boasted about spiriting me out an old sea gate—said it was on the Firth of Lorn side of the castle.”

“An old sea gate, you say?” Duncan studied the map then looked up. “Angus—dress two men in fishermen’s garb and have them locate this gate.”

Angus bowed and headed for the door. “Right away, m’lord.”

Duncan pointed at the map. “We can attack from all sides—blast the cannons and end this siege.”

Sean placed his palms on the table, fingers splayed. “I want Alan’s head. He imprisoned me in irons without so much as a drop of water and left me for dead. I want to see the look in his eyes before I take his head.”

“But you’re—”

Sean held up his hand. “Let me slip through the sea gate.”

“Perhaps not this time. What about your wounds?” Duncan frowned. “I can tell by looking at you, you’re weakened from starvation.”

Without moving, Sean eyed him. “I’ve fought while in worse condition.”

Duncan stood and crossed to the sideboard then poured three tots of whisky. “’Tis a risk to go in there on your own.”

“Aye,” Sean agreed.

“I cannot allow it in daylight.”

"Duncan, I can—"

The lord turned with a flagon in his hand. "I, more than any other, know what you are capable of. But I'm in charge of this standoff and I'll not have anyone recognizing you."

Sean bowed his head and accepted a cup from Duncan. "M'lord."

"A missive from the king," a messenger said from the doorway.

Sean kept his face averted.

"Thank you—report to the cook's tent and fill your belly." Duncan took it and ran his thumb under the wax seal and read. "My oath, the miserable sop has Herculean cods."

"What does it say?" Sean asked.

"It appears your bastard brother demanded the king grant him the Chieftainship of Dunollie *and* the Lordship of Lorn." Duncan tossed the missive on the table in front of Sean. "It seems there's been a premature announcement of your death as well."

Sean scanned the note then clenched it in his fists when he read the last line from the king: *Rid Scotland of this arrogant vermin. 'Tis why I hold ill favor for illegitimates. They oft do not know their place*.

Sean crumpled the velum. *It will be my pleasure*.

Duncan inclined his head in the direction of the camp. "How many people saw you?"

"Angus," Sean said, thinking back. "The guard down below. The camp was only beginning to stir when I arrived."

"Good. I want to keep your presence quiet." He pointed at Angus. "Go fetch Lady Meg. She can tend to Sean's lesions whilst we plan our attack."

It was a good thing Angus spotted her when she'd first arrived at Dunstaffnage, else Gyllis might have told the entire camp Sean was not only alive, she'd come to give him a piece of her mind. During the ride with Cadan, Gyllis had ample time to collect her conflicting thoughts. And the more she pondered it, the more she didn't care to wake up alone in Sean's enormous four-poster bed.

He had no business taking up his sword so soon after she'd found him on the precipice of death only the day before. For heaven's sake, he'd hardly been able to climb the stairs last eve. Would he even be able to raise a heavy two-handed sword above his head? Aside from his foolishness, he'd up and left her alone at Dunollie. What if a chambermaid happened upon her sleeping in his bed? She shuddered. He could have at least had the decency to wake her before he took his leave. Who knew what kind of deleterious state he was in when he arose that morn?

Angus led her toward the gatehouse tower. "If anyone asks, tell them you're here to see your brother. Mind you, the chieftain's

presence must be kept quiet."

"I understand." She tried not to limp and keep up with his fast pace. At least this time he hadn't told her to go home.

She followed the henchman up the stairs to the first floor of the tower until he stopped outside a closed door and turned to her. "Sir Sean told me it was you who found him in the cave. Please forgive me for not believing you, Miss Gyllis. If I had known you were planning to go after him alone, I would have assigned a guard to assist you."

Gyllis blinked. The man had been downright arrogant toward her. At the time, she sensed Angus considered her presence as irritating as a briar's thorn. But now was not the time to argue. She gestured toward her legs. "I hope you will disregard my limp and take me seriously the next time something important as your chieftain's life is in peril."

He turned scarlet and bowed his head. "Aye, miss."

When he opened the door, Gyllis clapped a hand to her chest. She'd expected to see Sean, but Duncan stood and glared at her. "Leave us, Angus."

"Very well, m'lord." The henchman shut the door and left Gyllis alone with her dragon-hearted brother. And from the look on his face, the dragon was awake and fiercely guarding his treasure of gold.

"You disobeyed me."

She moved her hands to her hips. "Pardon? As I see it, you *refused* to listen to me—even when your dearest friend's life was on the line."

He crossed his arms. "Let us not skirt the issue."

"Come again? The issue is—"

Duncan sliced his hand through the air. "I *told* you to ride home with the guard. And then my scheming wife convinced me you were helping her in the hospital tent. I ought to—"

"What?" Gyllis stamped her foot. "Send me to Ardchattan Priory to learn piety? Have you forgotten I've just returned from three months of their hospitality?" Oh no, Duncan wasn't about to quash her with: *I'm your brother and your lord so you'd better do as I say*. Gyllis balled her fists. Of all the pompous, bombastic, single-minded men she'd ever met, Duncan had to be the worst. She stomped up to him and glared. "When will you realize I am no longer a child?"

His eyes flashed with ire like they always did when she challenged him. "But 'tis my duty to protect you."

Though he could shoot daggers with his black-eyed glare, Gyllis wasn't about to back down. He always recited his *duty* as if it were more important than anything. "Mayhap, but 'tis not your burden to hogtie me and dismiss my every word as that of a daft cripple."

Blinking, Duncan stepped back. She'd caught him there. "I would never—"

“Oh no? And where would Sir Sean MacDougall be now if I had gone back to Kilchurn with my tail tucked between my legs? Tell me? Would you rather have his death on your hands?”

His face turned bright red. “But think of your reputation.”

“My God, Duncan, is that all that consumes your mind?”

He pulled out his chair and plopped down, rapping his fist on the table. “Damn it all, you test me.” He raked his fingers through his thick black hair. God, he looked like a dragon-fighter if there ever was one. “I’ve been friends with MacDougall since we were lads. We…we did things that young men do. I abhor the thought of my own sister—”

“Stop.” Gyllis placed her hands on the back of a chair and leaned forward. “Do you think I have not heard the rumors? As I recall, you were considered as much a rogue as Sir Sean. Mayhap more so.”

“That is different.” Blinking rapidly, he swatted a dismissive hand through the air. “Lady Meg made me realize the error of my ways. Since she came into my life, I have put the single man’s lifestyle behind me.”

“And Sir Sean is incapable of changing as you did? Have you even discussed it with him, or did you draw your thick-headed line in the sand and make a decree that he would never be worthy of a Campbell lass?” Gyllis shoved the chair against the table with a clatter. “That’s it, isn’t it? Ever since the time of the Bruce, Campbells have deemed themselves superior, especially over the MacDougalls. After all, Sean’s archaic ancestors supported the reprehensible King Edward of England. Sean and all MacDougalls should be punished throughout eternity for their ancestor’s treachery and lack of vision.”

Duncan stood. “Gyllis, you push me too far.”

“Aye?” She straightened and folded her arms. “I did not come here to argue with you.”

He swiped his hand across his mouth and looked away as if he were conjuring yet another dispute to dissuade her from loving Sean.

Whatever absurdity was about to spew from his mouth, Gyllis didn’t want to hear it. “Where is he? When I found him yesterday, he was on the very precipice of death—so weak and pale. He shouldn’t be here. He should be abed.”

“Sir Sean is young and resilient. Besides, he’s hell-bent on revenge. There’ll be no stopping him.”

Gyllis pursed her lips. “I ken, but I’ll see him before he takes on Alan and his army, and you’ll not stop me.”

After a long stare, Duncan pointed toward the ceiling. “One floor up. Meg is tending his wounds. And the next time I see you, you had better be dressed as a proper noblewoman.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Gyllis slipped into the chamber the next floor up. The guard tower wasn't built for comfort. The stairwell was extremely narrow and the stairs had been worn over years of use. Still sore and tired, she stumbled twice on her way up.

Fortunately, at each landing there was only one pie-shaped chamber. She caught her breath and pushed inside. Naked from the waist up, Sean sat in a wooden chair beside the hearth.

Meg stood beside him with a pot in her hand. She looked up and grinned. "Gyllis!"

A burning sensation spread throughout her chest. Limping, Gyllis marched across the floor and took the pot from Meg's grasp. "I should be tending his wounds."

The matron—Gyllis's closest friend—bowed her head and took a step back. "Of course. Apologies. Duncan sent me up. I was unaware you were here."

Gyllis glared at Sean. "Again it seems everyone wanted to cosset me in a tower whilst they solved the problems of all Christendom." She knew she was overreacting, but seeing Sean's bare chest in the presence of another woman with her eyes on him struck a nerve she could not control. "Must everyone take pity on me because I am a cripple?"

She shoved her fingers in the pot and filled them with gooey ointment.

Sean grabbed her wrist. "What are you saying? No one in this room has ever treated you any less because of your condition."

There. He'd said it—referred to her limp and slowness as a *condition*. "You do not need to say anything. Your actions give you away."

"How so? I, least of anyone, would pamper you because of a mild limp."

"You left me at Dunollie as if I could be of no help to you at all. And now you have my sister-in-law tending your wounds."

Sean's gaze darted to Meg. "That is because her husband ordered it."

Gyllis stammered. Hot blood pulsed beneath her skin. She wanted to scream. She wanted everyone to treat her as they had done before the paralysis. She hated being different—left in a big, comfortable bed to sleep whilst Sean rode into danger. How could he have frightened her like that?

"Do you think you are not wanted?" His voice grew softer.

Gyllis, too, looked at Meg. The lady curtsied and offered a gentle smile. “I should allow you two to talk. If you should need me I shall retire to the war room with Duncan for a bit.”

After the door closed behind Meg, Sean stood and brushed his fingers over Gyllis’s cheek. “*Mo leannan*. Look at yourself. You’ve come so far in such a short time. Everything you do amazes me.”

Her lips quivered—not quite ready to forgive him. “Then why did you leave me behind? You didn’t even tell me where you were going.” She wiped her fingers off on his chest. Still mad, she needed to talk this through or she’d burst. “I did not row for miles to see you run through by Alan MacCoul’s blade.”

Sean stared at her, his dark features growing darker. “If I had told you, you would have tried to stop me.”

She nodded vehemently. “As God is my witness, I would have.”

“But this is something I must do.”

“Why? Only yesterday, you were in purgatory, your body is weak. For heaven’s sake, the color has not yet returned to your face.” She gestured to his torso, riddled with seeping lesions. “How on earth do you expect to wear a hauberk over all those open sores?”

He grasped her palms between his hands. “I’ve fought injured before.”

She jerked her hands away. “But you are too weak. Please. Let Duncan and the others—”

“Do you not understand? I will never be able to live with myself if I recline in my bed whilst others fight my battles. I *must* do this.” He grasped her shoulders and held firm. “He imprisoned me in irons and left me for dead. His crimes are unconscionable.”

“But I’ve seen him fight.”

“He cannot best me. My entire life he has distained me. And now he is staking his claim on *my* title.”

“I am not saying what he’s doing is right, but I want you to live.” Burning tears rimmed her eyes. How could she convince him not to fight? “Would you choose your will for revenge over me?”

His eyes narrowed. “What are you saying?”

“Am I to stand idly by while you march to your death?”

“Gyllis, do not do this. I love you. When this is over, I will talk to Duncan and we will be wed. Is that not what you want?”

She shoved her finger in the pot and smeared it across a line of lesions. “I want you to survive this siege. You are *wounded*.” She didn’t wait for him to respond. If she didn’t leave now, he’d twist her heart around his finger and she’d never be able to see reason.

How could he do this? How could he cast aside the sacrifice she’d made for him and the intense love they’d shared only the night before? Gyllis was so angry, she dashed down the stairs moving far

too fast, but she needed air. She'd nearly made it down the two flights when one of her ankles twisted on an uneven step. Crying out, she flung her hands against the narrow walls to slow her momentum. But down she went with a crashing thud. Her buttocks hit the unforgiving stone first, followed by her back, then her head. The last thing she remembered was a man's voice hollering for the healer.

Gyllis clapped her hands over her eyes. She wasn't outside, but there was a blinding light surrounding her. "Where am I?"

Meg's face came into view right above hers. "You're awake." She inclined her head. "I had the guards carry you to Duncan's tent. It wouldn't have been proper to tend you in the hospital tent—too many men there. How are you feeling?"

Gyllis slid her hand to the back of her head and connected with a sizeable knot. "My head's throbbing."

"I'm sure it is. You had quite a tumble." Meg stuffed a pillow beneath Gyllis's shoulders. "I take it all didn't go well with Sir Sean earlier."

"I'll say." She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. "He refused to listen to reason and he's about to get himself killed." Gyllis tried to sit up. "I must stop him."

"You must rest." Meg sat beside her and rubbed ointment on Gyllis's head. It had a potent, minty smell and made her eyes water. "This should help clear the cobwebs."

"What's in it?"

"My own concoction. Smelling salts blended with peppermint, valerian and whale oil."

Gyllis blinked to clear her tears. "'Tis potent."

"Aye." Meg wiped her fingers on a cloth. "You ken, Sir Sean is one of the most skilled knights in all of Scotland."

"Aye."

Meg let out a long breath. "If I were bound in irons and left to starve, I'd want justice."

Gyllis reached for Meg's cloth and wiped off the ointment, so foul it was clearing the cobwebs a bit too fast. "Would you seek vengeance yourself or would you allow others to do battle for you?"

"If I were a knight, there'd be no question. I would face my oppressor."

"Even if you were weakened by hunger and had lesions all over your body?"

"Aye, even then. When a man faces battle something potent overcomes him. I even got a sense of it when I helped Duncan escape from the Edinburgh gaol. It's as if fatigue no longer matters—as if your muscles are infused with superhuman power." Meg brushed a

wisp of Gyllis's hair from her face. "Have you ever been stronger than you ever dreamed possible because you had no other option?"

She didn't have to ponder that question. "Aye. Only yesterday I rowed a skiff all the way to the southern end of Kerrera because I kent Sean was there. He needed me." Gyllis closed her eyes and swallowed. "I still do not know how I found the strength to row all that way from morning to late afternoon."

Meg drew a hand over her heart. "You rowed for miles and did not stop because you had to save the man you love?"

Gyllis gulped. "I did."

"Is it so different that he needs to take part in tonight's siege?"

"But he's not yet recovered."

"I've seen him better, for certain." Meg clasped Gyllis's hand. "Sometimes a man needs to prove he's a man—if not to others, to himself."

She bit her lip. "But I'm so frightened."

"Do you think I have no fear every time Duncan rides out with the enforcers?"

Gyllis pushed up on her elbow. "How do you face it? How can you bear to watch him leave?"

"I pray." Meg grasped her pot and stood. "And busy myself by helping others."

Sean hated upsetting Gyllis. On one hand, she was right. He'd need a few days of hearty meals before he regained all of his strength. But he doubted any woman would ever understand why he must face Alan.

At least he'd regained enough strength to overpower *that* scoundrel.

Sean looked at his hand. He closed his fist. *An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.*

Angus burst through the door. "'Tis Gyllis." He drew in a sharp inhale and pointed. "She's fallen and hit her head. Lady Meg is tending her in Duncan's tent."

"My God." Sean shoved back his chair and bounded toward the door. "What happened?"

"Wait." Angus grasped his wrist. "You cannot be seen. Where's your cloak?"

"Ballocks, we must make haste." Sean snatched his mantle from the peg and threw it over his shoulders. He pulled the hood low over his head. "Is she hurt?"

"She was unconscious when we carried her from the tower."

Sean kicked himself for allowing her to run off. He knew she was angry and those uneven tower stairs were difficult for a soldier to

negotiate. He'd been so wrapped up in his desire for vengeance, he'd not thought about her paralysis or the toll it must have taken on her body whilst she rowed for miles to his rescue. *No wonder she was so distressed.*

He flew down the steps with Angus right behind.

So controlled by hate, Sean hadn't thought to follow her. He just assumed she'd join Lady Meg with Duncan in the war room. He'd planned to give her time to cool off, but he should have escorted her. Christ, this was an army encampment filled with men, and he'd sat dumbly while the woman he loved fell, hit her head and lost consciousness.

His heart could have burst through his chest. His legs couldn't run fast enough. Jesus Christ, he wouldn't blame her if she never forgave him. He was the greatest fool who'd ever walked the shores of Dunollie.

"She slipped at the bottom of the stairwell." Angus panted, trying to keep up. "I h-heard her cry out. Lady Meg and I f-found her first."

"Bloody hell," Sean mumbled, running, clutching the damned hood low over his face.

He skidded to a stop outside the tent, grasped the flap and ducked inside. "Gyllis!" he said, running to her pallet. "Forgive me."

He dropped to his knees beside Lady Meg. "I never should have let you leave alone. I should have insisted someone escort you."

Thank God, she was awake and propped against the pillows. She reached for his hand. "Not to worry. I'll be fine."

"When Angus told me you were hurt, my heart seized." He held her fingers to his lips and kissed. "I don't know what I would have done if I had lost you."

"She has a nasty bump at the back of her head," Lady Meg said. "But she doesn't appear to have any latent effects—no forgetfulness, no vomiting."

That didn't ease Sean's racing heart. "As I ran the short distance from the tower to this tent, I realized there is nothing in the world more important than you. There is no one in the world I want more than you and there is no vengeance more important than your love."

A gasp caught in Gyllis's throat. Tears welled in her eyes.

Lady Meg stood. "I must go check on an arrow wound that has been festering. If you'll please excuse me."

Sean rose and bowed. "My lady, allow me." He escorted her and held the tent flap, then quickly returned to Gyllis's side, dipping to one knee. "Are you in pain?"

She squeezed his hand. "Aside from a wee headache, I'm well. 'Tis the problem with being an invalid, everyone thinks you're frail."

"But you *are* as fragile as a dove." She struggled to sit up and Sean

pressed his hand to her shoulder. “You must rest.”

“No.” She pushed up, a crease forming between her eyebrows, those gorgeous green eyes flashing with ire. “I’ve had enough of everyone telling me what to do—treating me like I haven’t a mind because of an illness.”

Of all the things about Gyllis there were to love, he adored her spirit the most. “You’re right, *mo leannan*. In my observation nothing can stop you from achieving anything you set your mind to.”

She smiled and cupped his face with her palm. “You may be the only person who believes that.”

Sean leaned into her hand then turned his lips into her palm and kissed it. “I meant what I said. You mean more to me than any other person in the entire world.” His heart ached, but he had to say it. No matter what he wanted, Gyllis was more important. “If you do not wish for me to face Alan, I shall stay behind.”

Never had he seen her smile so vibrant. That gift alone made up for the disappointment of watching another act in his stead. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him onto the pallet beside her. “By the grace of God, I love you Sean MacDougall.”

“And I you, Gyllis Campbell, with all my heart, my soul, my life, my riches. I give them all to you.”

She threaded her fingers through his. “But I cannot allow you to step away from a task I know in my heart you must do.”

Sean arched his brows, sure he’d misunderstood. “Pardon me?”

“If.” She held up a finger. “If you were to face Alan MacCoul, would you promise to return to me unharmed?”

“That’s a difficult promise to make.” He scratched his head. “A man can be injured sparring with his guard in the keep’s courtyard. Stepping in the midst of battle always bears a risk.”

“I ken.” She nodded and stared at their interlaced fingers. “If I give my consent and you join Duncan this night, will you promise to exercise every care so that you will return to my arms?”

He pulled her into his embrace and inhaled. Her hair smelled of home—exactly where his heart resided. Gyllis’s fragrance from here out would remind him of home. “You have my vow. It will make me stronger to face that demon knowing you are waiting with open arms.”

“Then you must eat and rest, for you’ll need as much strength as you can muster.”

He grinned and ran his hand up the back of her head. “Are you sure that fall didn’t do some damage?”

She gave him a playful smack to the ribs and they both laughed.

Gazing into her fathomless eyes, Sean grew serious. He’d always loved Gyllis, but in this moment, his love grew tenfold. Somehow,

between when she left the tower to when she arrived in the tent, she had grown to understand him, understand what a man—a chieftain—must do to earn respect, and more so, to maintain his honor.

Aye, he would have stayed behind for Gyllis, but now he would never forget how she cast aside her conviction and stood by him. He would spend his life repaying her favor.

He closed his eyes and claimed her mouth, showing her the depth of his love. The woman in his arms would be his throughout eternity.

Chapter Thirty

After blackening their faces with soot, Sean boarded a skiff with the most elite warriors in the Highland Enforcers and together they rowed from the pier around to the sea gate. Sean sat astern, Eoin manned the oars and Duncan sat beside his cousin, Robert Struan at the bow.

They'd left the newest member of the enforcers in charge of the army. Iain Campbell, Duncan's youngest brother, had recently returned from his fostering with the Earl of Argyll. Better, the lad had acquired some training in the operation of the cannons Duncan's forces had aimed to blast through Dunstaffnage's walls.

But Sean planned to end the siege this night. Alan had been holed up, locked inside the castle for four days. Foodstuffs would be low and tempers flaring. Once MacCoul was subdued, his men would cross over, lest they all end up feeling the hangman's noose.

Sean slid his hands up his sleeves to ensure his daggers were secure, then he did the same to the knives hidden in his hose. He didn't have much time to slip in and find his quarry. When the chapel bell tolled the end of compline, Iain would fire a warning shot past Dunstaffnage's walls into the Firth of Lorn. That would be the signal for all to attack. There would be no turning back this time, no volley of arrows. Ladders for scaling the walls were readied, a tree had been felled and reinforced with an iron tip. The main gate would be rammed. Five hundred MacDougalls, Campbells, Stewarts and MacGregors stood at the ready to overthrow the usurper and Sean would see an end to it once and for all.

The boat lightly tapped the stone embankment above the sea gate.

"Ready?" Duncan whispered loudly.

Sean offered a nod. This was how he wanted it. No one was more elusive. Undertaking the king's business—the enforcer's business—Sean had slipped inside castles from England to the Orkneys and this was no different.

He thrived on danger.

Before Robert had the boat tied, Sean jumped over the rail and crouched on the narrow wall. He didn't look back at the others. They all knew the plan. They'd worked together so many years, there was no need to talk. If they didn't adhere to the plan, someone would be killed—a lesson not easily forgotten. The first Lord of Glenorchy, Duncan's father had been killed on a mission at Kildrummy Castle. They'd all followed the plan, but sometimes things happened that one couldn't predict. Another lesson which would never be forgotten. *Always expect the unexpected.*

Sean pressed his ear against the wooden gate. Faint footsteps paced on the other side. He'd need to be swift and deadly.

He slid his dirk from its scabbard and held up one finger to Duncan. There was one man for certain—two if Alan had another posted at the top of the incline, but they'd know soon enough. Sean levered the pin out from the top hinge while Duncan and Eoin steadied the door.

After he'd removed the bottom pin, Duncan gave the men a nod. As they pulled the door away, Sean reached in, grabbed the guard by the chin and snapped his neck. "Sorry, you bastard. You might have lived if you'd not paid fealty to a blackguard."

With no movement ahead, Sean pulled the MacCoul guard through the hole while Duncan and Eoin slid the gate back into place.

Once he'd donned the man's helm and surcoat, Sean picked up the soldier's battleax and nodded to Duncan. "Ready."

"We'll cover the gate until we hear the signal. You'll not have a soul watching your back," Duncan warned.

Sean shoved the visor over his face. Why Campbell felt he had to say something was beyond him. Even the Lord of Glenorchy had tried to talk him into staying behind. *You look like shite*, Duncan had said. God's teeth. Sean had gone without food and sleep before—mayhap things had never been as bad as his last day in the cave, but he'd eaten three meals since he'd returned *and* he'd slept. How much fitter did Duncan expect him to be?

He had to do this alone. Not only was he the "Ghost", more than one newcomer would cause a stir amongst MacCoul's men. Even one was a risk, but Sean was a master at blending in. He took the torch from the wall and held it high.

He slipped up the incline from the sea gate, into a dark cavern, praying it led directly under the inner bailey and into the catacombs of the donjon. The dank tunnel dripped with water. A clammy sweat crawled down Sean's back as he was reminded of his recent hospitality on Kerrera. The lesions throbbed beneath his hauberk and infused his ire. He sped his pace.

Stopping at the door, he held his breath and listened. Once sure he would be met with no nasty surprises, he tugged the door open. The hinges screeched as if they'd been sealed shut for three hundred years. He slipped inside and palmed his dirk, ready for a fight. But no one came.

At the far side of the room, rats scurried away. Sean sniffed. It reeked of sewage. He strode across the dirt floor to the passageway. Dark in both directions, he continued to his left. If his bearings served him right, the tower stairwell was ahead.

He crept against the wall. At any moment, some unsuspecting

bastard could venture down to the catacombs—though he doubted it. The bowels of a castle were akin to the path to Hades. And if Sean had them pegged right, this mob of outlaws would be a suspicious lot.

After he rounded the corner, dim light glowed from the stairwell. He'd chosen correctly. He doused his torch and snuck forward. Rumbles of voices from the great hall grew louder as he neared. He closed the visor of his helm. He'd need to cross through the great hall to get to the donjon—and Sean had no doubt MacCoul was biding his time in the second floor solar. It was where the king held court the infrequent times he was in residence—also where the Lord of Lorn had run his affairs. MacCoul would believe he was due such a chamber of opulence with its rich tapestries from France.

Sean's feet made not a sound as he ascended. Before the stairwell opened upon the great hall, he froze, his heartbeat pulsing in his ears. Conversation rumbling from the pillagers was gruff.

"Even more Campbell supporters have arrived—and still no missive from the king," a voice said. "Soon every army in Scotland will be here to drive us out."

"I think we should fight now—show them MacCoul's army is one to be reckoned with."

"Aye? If our leader doesn't move soon, we'll be the ones they're calling traitors."

Sean smirked. The lot of them were already traitors—and MacCoul would receive his missive from the king—in hell.

He slipped through the entrance and moved at a meandering pace, as if he'd just been relieved of guard duty. His breath turned to mist against the helm, the eye slits barely giving him the range of sight he needed to see if there were any eyes watching him with suspicion. But he resisted the urge to glance from side to side and kept his face forward.

Ten paces to the donjon stairwell, a man stepped in his path. "Why are you still wearing your helm?"

Sean rubbed his neck. "Just returned from duty."

Before he could stop him, the man flipped up Sean's visor and squinted. "I haven't seen you before."

Sean snapped his head back and the visor dropped. Thank God the fool hadn't recognized him. "I've been keeping to myself—guarding the rear." He didn't want to mention the sea gate. If this man put the pieces together, Duncan and the others could end up in a nasty fight. Sean tried to push past.

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

Christ, the bastard couldn't leave it alone. "I've a message for MacCoul."

The man grabbed his arm. "Have you a missive from the king?" he

asked excitedly.

If Sean said yes, the entire hall would follow him above stairs. "Nay."

"Then what is it?" His pickled breath oozed through the helm's eye slits.

Sean wrenched his arm away. "'Tis of a sensitive nature." Jesus, the smelly varlet wouldn't let it be. "Follow me and I'll tell you."

That seemed to placate the cur because he chuckled and motioned toward the stairwell.

"After you." Sean bowed. "I take it MacCoul's in the solar as usual?"

Moving forward, at least the man wasn't smart enough to stay at Sean's rear. "Aye."

Good, that's all the information Sean needed from this maggot. At the first landing, he slipped one hand over the man's mouth, pulled him into the servant's closet and ran his dirk across the bastard's neck. He leaned the battleax against the wall. Sean preferred to fight with a sword and a dirk, not the clumsy axe of a novice.

He wiped his dirk on the man's chausses and then shoved it in his scabbard. "If you'd left me be, you'd still be alive." Then Sean dashed up to the next landing, not stopping until he heard voices coming from inside the king's solar.

Sean clenched his teeth. Alan was arguing with none other than that festering-pustule, Brus. Sean would recognize that backstabber's grating voice anywhere. Brus had always followed MacCoul around like a leech—had laughed in Sean's face before they'd left him to die.

Take your last breath, for hell is about to unleash its vengeance.

Sean silently lifted the latch and peered inside. Alan sat in the king's chair, with Brus leaning against the sideboard, arms and ankles crossed as if he owned the castle. Sean fingered the dagger up his left sleeve. In one fluid motion, he pushed through the door, flung the blade, hitting Brus in the neck, then drew his sword.

Thus far, not a shout had been uttered. Staring MacCoul in the eye, Sean closed the door behind him and bolted it.

Alan shoved back his chair and drew their father's sword. "You," he growled unable to hide the surprise in his voice.

Gurgling empty curses, Brus clutched at the knife and fell face first on the table.

Alan sidestepped, his eyes wide with fear. "Get thee from me, ghost. I left you for dead—no man could have lived this long."

"You are quite mistaken." Sean leveled his sword with Alan's heart. "Had you been honest with me from the outset, our feud wouldn't have ended this way."

"Oh?" he continued to circle around the table. "And I would have

survived in my little brother's shadow?"

"You've lost that chance. Now you will die in it."

Alan lunged. "I think not."

Sean skittered aside, a chair toppling over. He nearly lost his balance as he deflected Alan's attack.

Alan advanced with relentless hacks of his blade. He'd grown stronger since Beltane.

And Sean had grown weaker.

Backing around the room, it was all he could do to deflect the onslaught of vicious strikes. Sean's muscles burned, barely able to wield the sword in his hands. Duncan had been right. Everyone had been right. Sean's strength was half what it should be, his movement slowed by sluggishness.

Gnashing his teeth, Alan lunged in for the kill. Sean raised his blade for the deflection, a hair's breadth before the sword sliced him across the neck. His helm flew from his head and clattered to the floor. Iron screeched with iron as their blades locked until they met at the cross guards. In a battle of strength, Sean could no longer control his muscles and he quaked mercilessly. Planting his left foot, he used his right to push MacCoul away and gain enough space to run.

He sped around the table to put some distance between them. Panting, he watched Alan swing his sword in an arc. The bastard laughed—taunted Sean. "I see my hospitality has turned you into a milksop."

Sean said nothing, sucking in deep breaths, willing the air to revive him.

Alan sauntered around the table. "After I kill you, I'll be Chieftain of Dunollie and I'll marry that Campbell bitch—something you never had the cods to do."

"You bleeding bastard. You'll not touch her!" Sean went on the attack, swinging his sword like a madman. He never allowed himself to lose control when in a fight, but rage gripped his chest like a vise. He couldn't stop. The thought of Alan claiming Gyllis for his own drove him to the brink of insanity.

A picture of Fraser's mutilated body sent him into a raving frenzy. "I will avenge Fraser's death."

"That spineless maggot?" MacCoul blocked Sean's strike and the next. On and on Sean advanced while the blackguard continued to back around the table. "I took great pleasure in gutting your asp-biting spy."

Rage infusing him with strength, Sean used both hands, spinning, aiming for the braggart's head. MacCoul ducked and came up, jabbing the pommel of his sword into Sean's gut. Wind whooshed from Sean's lungs. He gasped for air and steadied himself.

Never had he tired this easily.

A blast came from beyond the walls. The cannon's warning had been fired. MacCoul was already supposed to be dead.

Alan advanced. Sean deflected. Iron clanged. Sean erred with slips of the wrist and deadly mistakes. But he wasn't about to give up. Spinning, he hurled his blade. MacCoul met his strike with equal force. With jarring power reverberating up his arms, the sword flew from Sean's grip.

Before he could reach for his dirk, Alan slipped his blade against Sean's neck and laughed like Satan himself. "I should have cut your throat at the cave and been done with it."

Sean spat. "You'll never succeed. The king will not recognize your claim."

Alan's eyes flashed wide and he pressed the blade harder. "I will be Chieftain of Dunollie and Lord of Lorn. It is my rightful place. My inheritance." The man's face grew red. Clearly, he couldn't bear to think he could possibly fail.

Pride is a great sin.

"What about Dugald?" Sean purchased time. "He's Lorn's heir."

"I killed Lorn," Alan gloated.

"But he didn't die before he took his vows." Sean dropped his arm and slid the dagger from his hose. "And our father only claimed one son. The king signed your death warrant."

Alan bellowed like a caged lion. "You lie! You'll not be here to see the riches I am granted. All of the Highlands will fear me. I will cut off your head and impale it on a pike above the gate as a testament as to who is the better son." Baring his teeth, he grasped Sean's hair, swinging his blade back.

Time slowed.

The cannon boomed with a long drawn-out blast.

Sean watched the blade rise then focused on the pulsing vein in Alan's exposed neck. He could hear the thump of his brother's heart. A drop of Alan's sweat splattered on his cheek. *He will never touch Gyllis.*

Before their father's sword began its downward momentum, Sean sprang up and sliced his dagger across MacCoul's throat.

In mid-swing, the sword's edge embedded deep into Sean's shoulder, but he didn't feel a thing.

Stunned and grasping at his throat, Alan fell onto Sean. "I am the eldest son," he croaked.

Sean wrapped him in his arms. "I wish it had been different between us, brother."

Alan let out a long hissing breath. His last.

Sean rested his brother's body on the floor and passed a hand over his face to close Alan's vacant eyes. Aye, he'd done what he must, but

this was not victorious.

When he started to stand, Sean's head spun. He glanced down at the gash in his shoulder. Thick blood oozed down his hauberk. He reached for the chair to steady himself, but it was just beyond his grasp. Grunting, Sean fell forward and collapsed atop Alan's body.

Chapter Thirty-One

Gyllis and Meg clung to each other in Duncan's tent while the battle raged. Every blast from the cannons made Gyllis quake in the oversized kirtle Meg had borrowed for her. "When will it be over?"

"I know not," Meg's voice trembled every bit as much as Gyllis's did. "But we will be victorious. There is no other option."

A man screamed, followed by a bone-crunching thud. Gyllis didn't want to think—but her mind's eye still pictured a warrior falling from the battlements.

She forced herself not to scream. "What if Sean or Duncan is hurt?"

Meg grasped her shoulders firmly and looked Gyllis in the eye. "We will not think on it."

"I hate hiding in this tent. What more can we do to help?"

"Pray."

Meg had always been pious and Gyllis grew inordinately guilty about having cursed at God the day before. She cringed. "I yelled at the heavens when I couldn't find Sean. God could be very upset with me this day."

Meg clasped her hands, squeezing tighter with her claw. Meg only used that hand when she was dead serious. "Did you find Sean?"

"Aye," Gyllis whispered—of course Meg knew she had.

"Well then, sometimes you might need to yell to be heard." She closed her eyes and recited the twenty-third psalm. Gyllis followed along, mouthing the words. Evidently Meg didn't feel it necessary to yell, because she kept her tone even and somber.

When Meg finished, an eerie hush hung over the encampment. Gyllis stood and turned full circle, hearing not a single scrape of a sword.

"The siege is over, long live the king!" someone bellowed.

A roar of triumphant voices rose around them.

Gyllis grinned at Meg and pulled her hand. "Come." Together they made their way over the barbican bridge and into the inner bailey as fast as Gyllis could manage. Men were celebrating, running past them with their weapons held high, but the women fought through the crowd. When they reached the donjon, Gyllis clapped a hand to her chest and caught her breath. "Have you seen them?"

Meg turned full circle. "Not yet."

A fallen man clutched at his stomach, lying in a pool of blood. "Help. Someone, please help me."

Meg pointed to the doors. "You go—I cannot leave him."

Gyllis needed no more encouragement. For all she knew, Sean could be laying in his own pool of blood. When she pushed into the

great hall, all she saw was madness. Duncan's men were rounding up the usurpers and had them lying on the floor with their hands behind their heads. But the King's solar was above stairs. Pushing through the crowd, she made her way to the stairwell.

As she climbed, pounding grew louder. When she reached the landing, Duncan and Mevan were chopping the solar door with a battleax. She didn't need to ask. Sean was in there, and so was Alan MacCoul.

Dread iced through her veins while she watched them beat down the door. When they finally had it clear, she rushed in. "Sean!" Her heart stopped. Sean didn't move. Slumped over the body of MacCoul, all color had drained from his face.

Blood pooled thickly on the floor. Splatters covered everything.

"No!" *He cannot be dead.*

Tears stinging her eyes, she threw herself over him. "Sean. 'Tis me. We've won!" She shook his shoulders. "Sean. Wake up. Please. Wake."

Duncan grasped her shoulder. "Our dear friend is gone, lass."

Ice coursed across her skin. "No," she cried through her tears. "I do not believe it."

Duncan again tugged, but Gyllis clamped her arms around Sean. "I will *not* leave him." She turned and glared at her brother. "Carry him to a chamber."

"But—"

"Do it." She pointed. "Now!"

Duncan nodded his head once and beckoned Mevan. "There's a bedchamber next door. The women will be able to prepare his body there."

Gyllis grasped Sean's hand. His fingers were frigid—and there was a deep gash on his shoulder.

"Stand aside," Duncan said.

Sucking in her tears, she allowed the men to lift Sean's body. His head flopped back and his arms and legs hung limp as they hauled him into the next room and placed him on the bed. "Send for Lady Meg," she snapped.

Duncan hesitated for a moment, but he didn't say a word.

They left her alone, holding Sean's hand.

Chapter Thirty-Two

In the dimly lit room, Gyllis threw herself over Sean's lifeless body, a wail erupting from her throat. "Please God, no." She could scarcely utter the words through her fitful sobbing. She held up her blistered palms, still so painful from rowing to Kerrera. "You did not guide me to Kerrera only to see him killed here!"

She prostrated herself atop him.

"I do not believe it."

"I do not believe it."

"I. Do. Not!"

Reaching down, she threaded her fingers through his and kissed them. "You told me you would be careful."

A pained cry caught in the back of her throat.

"Why did I allow Meg to talk me into letting you fight? I knew you were weakened, yet I trusted everyone and *ignored* my own heart."

Spittle leaked from the corner of her mouth. "Please, God. D-do not take him from me."

She scooted up and cupped his face with her palm. He seemed so peaceful—not dead, but in a deep sleep. How a man could be so beautiful, she could not fathom. And this man had loved her in spite of all her adversity, in spite of her limp, in spite of her every weakness.

"I will always love you." She pressed her lips to his and closed her eyes, praying all the while. His lips were far warmer than his fingers—warmer than the chill within the chamber.

Sean's chest rose and fell.

Gyllis jolted up. "Sean?"

He didn't move.

She held a finger beneath his nose. A faint puff of warm air caressed her finger.

Clapping a hand over her mouth, she gasped. "Oh, thank God." She limped to the door as fast as she could and swung it open. "Fetch Lady Meg. Sir Sean is alive!" Gyllis latched on to an arm of a passing guard. "Did you hear me? Fetch Lady Meg at once."

She must have been assertive or half-crazed, because the guard saluted. "Yes, m'lady. Straight away."

Swiping away her tears, Gyllis hastened back to the bed. "Lady Meg is coming. We must see to this horrible gash on your shoulder." Her heart fluttered. "You will be fine. I know it."

There wasn't much left of his sleeve, so she tore it away and pushed the remaining cloth aside to inspect the wound. It was deep, but she couldn't see bone. That had to be a good sign.

Meg rushed inside. “I’ve sent Mevan to fetch my basket.”

“His chest heaved and I felt warm air from his nose.”

“Thank heavens.” Meg inspected Sean’s arm. “I’ll need to stitch this straight away.” She grimaced. “But ’tis so deep, he could lose the arm.”

“What’s an arm compared to a life?”

“Let us pray we can save both.” Meg faced her. “Regardless, I’ll need your help. The injuries out there are horrendous. You’ll have to tend him all night—keep a cool cloth on his forehead, spoon willow tea into his mouth. Can you do that?”

“Of course. I will do anything.”

“I’ve your basket, m’lady,” Mevan said from the doorway.

Meg beckoned him. “Bring it here, then go help the others. I’ll head to the hospital tent as soon as I stitch up this wound.”

Mevan set the basket on the bedside table and hissed. “Bloody hell, MacCoul nearly took his arm off.”

“’Tis none too pretty.” Meg fished for a whalebone needle and thread. “Gyllis, you’ll need both hands to hold Sir Sean’s flesh together.”

“I’ll do anything you need.”

“Good.” Meg smiled. “I hope you have a strong stomach.”

Gyllis would have a strong anything if it meant Sean would live. When she moved to Sean’s shoulder, she ignored the pain in her palms and bore down with all her strength, matching the two sides of his skin. She watched Meg’s every stitch until the last one was tied off.

Meg swiped off the blood with a cloth and secured her needle in the basket. “Remember what I said. Keep his forehead cool. Keep the wound doused with avens oil. Have the chambermaid bring you willow bark tea and ale. Keep spooning it into his mouth until he wakes.”

He wakes. Those words were like angel’s bells. “I’ll keep a vigil for a month if I must.”

“If things grow worse, send someone to fetch me.” She put the basket over her arm. “I fear this will be a long night for us all.”

As she’d promised, Gyllis maintained a vigil at Sean’s side. Blood seeped from his wound, but she saw that as a good sign—God’s own form of cleansing. The past few days had sped past in such a blur. She sat beside him on the bed, allowing herself to doze only for brief moments in between dousing the cloth in cool water. She hummed and talked as she worked—partly for her sake and partly for Sean’s. If he could hear her, she wanted him to know she was there—would always be beside him.

The witching hour must have come because Gyllis’s eyelids refused

to stay open. Sleep kept trying to claim her mind. Her head continuously bobbed. She got up and paced the floor, but her toe stubbed repeatedly, making her stumble. Walking, exhaustion and the latent effects of paralysis did not go well together.

She pulled a wooden chair beside the bed and sat, realizing the hour glass had run its course. Once she turned it over, she picked up the tankard with the tea and a spoon. “Time for another tincture, my love.” She ladled a few drops in Sean’s mouth—his lips were still so chapped. “Did I ever tell you about the time Helen and I were spying on you and Sir Eoin MacGregor?”

“Nay,” a raspy voice answered.

She held the spoon completely still, her gaze shooting to Sean’s face. His eyes were still closed. “Nay?” she asked, wondering if her mind was playing tricks.

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “N-nay,” he said.

“My goodness, you heard me?”

He nodded slightly.

“Are you in pain?”

“Aye.” His eyes opened a wee bit. “Come here.”

She set down her things and nestled beside him, careful not to disturb his wound. “They thought you were dead, but I wouldn’t believe it.”

A chuckle caught in his throat. “I’m glad you did not.” He licked his lips. “But I’d expect no less from my woman.”

Her heart squeezed. “I’ll take care of you, Sean MacDougall. I shall care for you until I draw my last breath.”

“I’m the one who should be uttering such words of chivalry.” He blinked then widened his eyes. “You have my vow, I will protect you forever. You will always be the keeper of my heart. Never again will I be so foolish as to walk into battle when I ken I am weak. That bastard nearly killed me.”

“Hush.” Gyllis placed her finger to his lips. “You did what you must. Now let us spoon some willow tea in your belly. It will help keep the fever at bay.”

“Nay. All I need is you beside me. A wee bit of sleep and I’ll be right.”

“You’re a rugged man, Sean MacDougall.” She snuggled into him and pulled the bedclothes around their shoulders. “Everything will be better on the morrow.”

Her mind was in a fog when the door burst open.

“Heaven help us, you are ruined.” Mother rushed inside, slamming the door behind her.

As soon as Gyllis heard the voice, she bolted upright. “Ma? What

are you doing here?" Devil's bones, she needed about another sennight of sleep.

"You expected me to sit idle when news of a battle arrived at Kilchurn? And I was right to come. Look at you. In bed with a *man*! If that's not bad enough, there are armies of people everywhere. You are *scandalous*!" She clapped a hand to her forehead and paced. "The family will be disgraced. I'll never find husbands for Marion or Alice. All three of you will be ruined."

Gyllis glanced downward at her borrowed, ill-fitting kirtle and then across to Sean's naked chest—he hadn't awakened with Mother's tirade. Gyllis shook her head to clear the cobwebs and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. "He's been unconscious most of the night. God's teeth, Ma, Lady Meg assigned me to his care."

"Watch your vulgar tongue." Mother held up a finger. "That didn't mean you should climb into bed with the man. Who has seen you?"

"N-no one. I stayed awake until I could no longer hold up my head."

Ma stopped pacing and glared across the room. "I must have Duncan speak to Sir Sean at once." She walked up to the bed, as if she'd only realized Sean was still sleeping. "The only way to avoid a scandal is for him to propose marriage this day." She patted his cheek. "Sir Sean?"

He didn't move.

Gyllis grasped Mother's arm. "Please, let him rest. He was severely injured—was close to death." She swallowed her urge to smile and led her mother to the chairs in front of the hearth. Had she honestly used the words *propose marriage*? "I've wanted to talk to you in earnest about Sir Sean for a long time. Perhaps we can have a word whilst he slumbers."

Mother pursed her lips as if the thought didn't appeal. With one last glance over her shoulder she relented and sat.

Gyllis leaned her head in and kept her voice low. "Did Helen speak to you?"

"Aye," Ma whispered.

"So you know Sir Sean visited me…um…frequently when I was at Ardchattan?"

Mother nodded.

"And you are aware we wish to marry?"

"Wheesht." Ma grasped her hand and squeezed. "For some ridiculous reason, Duncan has never approved of Sir Sean's affinity for you, so you'd best wipe that smile off your face and play along if I am to have any chance of success." She violently shook her finger. "This is scandalous," she raised her voice. "You remained the entire night in this chamber alone with Sir Sean? How could you? Now *only* Duncan

can keep the entire family from ruination!"

Gyllis hid her face in her hands. Evidently Mother had arrived at Dunstaffnage with a well-thought plan of her own.

Every inch of his body ached, but Sean forced himself to open his eyes. For some mysterious reason, he could have sworn he'd heard Lady Margaret's shrill voice shouting about a scandal—and he was the rogue at the bottom of it. He'd been the center of a scandal before, but definitely couldn't admit to any foul play last eve.

"But Sir Sean could have died had I not been here to tend him," Gyllis said.

The women were near the hearth. Sean tried to sit up, but unholy stabbing pain stopped him with a bellow. "Bloody hell."

"Sean," Gyllis hastened toward the bed. "You're awake."

He gritted his teeth, biting back the pain. "Aye, and there'll be no scandal. Let the old windbags talk. I'll marry Gyllis this day."

"Sir Sean." Lady Margaret rushed to the head of the bed. "I knew you would see reason." She brushed the hair from his forehead. "If you are to be wed, we must have time to plan." She held up a finger as if she had everything scripted. "A betrothal will be quiet sufficient. But first you must have words with Lord Duncan."

The door swung open. "What the blazes are you doing here, Mother?" The Lord of Glenorchy strode inside, hair mussed, shoving his shirt into his breeks.

Once the door closed, the lady marched up to him. "Are you aware your sister spent the entire night with this man?"

Gyllis pattered in behind Ma. "But he was unconscious. Lady Meg told—"

"Enough," Lady Margaret cut Gyllis off and returned her attention to Duncan. "We have no choice but to insist Sir Sean makes a proposal of marriage to Gyllis this very day, else she and your sisters will be ruined and I shall never find husbands for them all."

Duncan cast a heated look in Sean's direction. "Bloody Christmas, Mother. How the devil did you arrive so early? Do not tell me you rode all night."

"And why ever not? After I received word that my son, my daughter and the mother of my grandchild were embroiled in a battle with a ruthless scourge. Of course I gathered the guard and rode all night." She jabbed her finger into Duncan's sternum. "But that is not the issue at hand. You must have words with Sir Sean. There are people mulling about *everywhere*. News of my daughter's indiscretion will run rampant."

"But—"

Mother stretched a bit taller. "I'd be surprised if the rumors haven't

already spread."

"I do not—"

"Thank the good Lord I arrived when I did. The only way to avoid a scandal is if you accept his proposal of marriage to your sister forthwith."

Duncan scratched his head. "Are you finished?"

With a satisfied and aristocratic rise of her chin, Lady Margaret took Gyllis by the hand. "Follow me, dear. We must leave the men to talk." On the way out she shook her finger at Duncan. "I do not want you to leave this chamber until you have come to an agreement."

Despite the excruciating pain in his shoulder, Sean withheld his urge to laugh. Aside from Lady Meg, Lady Margaret was the only person Sean had ever seen make Duncan eat his words. But he had no illusions that his friend would be in a bear of a mood. Sean eased to his good side and forced himself to sit up.

Duncan faced him and glowered. "You're the only man I know who could cause a scandal whilst out senseless."

Sean tried to smile, but his lip split. "Aye, and I didn't even chance to have any fun." He winced, Christ, sometimes he didn't know when to keep his mouth shut.

"Bloody damnation and ballocks to that." At least Duncan didn't hit him. "You look like shite."

"Feel like it, too." He licked the blood from his lip. "You ken I've always been in love with Gyllis."

"Aye, but I've fought your affinity for my sister for years." Duncan sat on the bed beside him. "You'll have to put an end to your womanizing, else I'll be forced to tell Ma the girls are ruined."

"You'd do that?" Sean forced a grin. The lusty laddie moniker had to go. He hated to admit it to Duncan, but it was time to bare his soul. "I haven't looked at a woman other than Gyllis in over a year. Even after you sent me to the miserable borders, I kept to myself." God, his head hurt. Everything hurt as if he'd been bludgeoned within an inch of his life. "I love her, Duncan. I would die for her."

"Even after her paralysis? You ken she may never be graceful—never dance again."

"Do you think I care? I love Gyllis for the angel she is in her heart." Sean swiped a hand across his chapped lips. "I've loved her since your mother forced us to take part in all those silly dancing lessons, and my love for her grew tenfold after Gyllis, stricken with paralysis, rowed from Dunstaffnage to the southern tip of Kerrera because she remembered a threat Alan MacCoul made months prior—a threat *you* heard him utter."

"And yet I didn't believe her. I, too, can be a dunce at times." Shaking his head, the corners of Duncan's mouth turned up. "Very

well, I shall agree to your betrothal, but you will not spend another moment alone with my sister until after your vows are sealed."

Sean held up his palm. "Just allow me a modicum of time."

Duncan eyed him.

"I'm in no condition to take advantage of the lass—and she needs a proper proposal."

"Very well." He held up a finger just like his Ma had done only moments ago. "But keep in mind, I will be right outside."

When Duncan opened the door, Lady Margaret, Lady Meg and Gyllis all stared up at him as if they were trying to pretend they hadn't overheard a word. He ushered Gyllis into the chamber. "Sir Sean wants to speak to you for a moment and that is all I will allow."

When the door closed behind her, Gyllis tiptoed inside with her hands steepled to her lips. "I am sorry all of this had to happen whilst you are in so much pain."

Sean stood, his legs wobbling beneath him. The past few days had nearly sent him to an early grave.

Gyllis rushed forward and grasped his elbow. "You should still be abed."

"Mind you, that's exactly where I'm headed, but there's one thing I must do first." Thank God he didn't fall on his face as he went down on bended knee. He took her hand in his palms.

Her wee gasp made his blood thrum anew.

Taking a big inhale he stared at the eyes that had enraptured him since boyhood—the only lips he wanted to kiss, the woman who had grown to mean so much to him. "Gyllis Marietta Campbell, you have shown me courage beyond that of any man I know. You have shown me perseverance to rival the greatest of men, and you are the dearest and most stunning creature I have ever seen. I love you more passionately than life itself…You have claimed my heart. Will you do me the honor of agreeing to be my wife?"

By the time he'd finished the brief proclamation of his undying love, a tear spilled from Gyllis's eye and splashed on the back of his hand. Keeping her palm in his grasp, he first kissed her salty tear, then turned her hand and pressed his lips against it.

"Aye," she whispered. "I will marry you, Sir Sean MacDougall."

Chapter Thirty-Three

After Sean's proposal, they had decided to hold the wedding at Kilbride Church on Dunollie lands. In front of the polished copper mirror, Gyllis sat in the chamber where she'd tried to sleep that first night when she'd visited Dunollie—the one where she and Sean couldn't return to Ardchattan due to the flooding.

Helen straightened Gyllis's gold veil which was held in place by a circlet encrusted with emeralds. "You make a beautiful bride."

Gyllis offered a sheepish smile. "If only I could have been at *your* wedding."

"It was nice, though not as well attended as yours." Helen toyed with Gyllis's collar. "My, Mother must have invited half of Argyllshire."

"I believe she did." Gyllis chuckled. "And how is life as the Lady of Ardnamurchan?"

Helen glanced toward the window. "I enjoy running the keep—just as I always thought I might."

"And Sir Aleck? Is he treating you well?"

"Aye, I suppose. He's an unusual man when he's home. He's oft away—embroiled in the feud with the MacDonalds." She reached for a bottle of rose oil sitting atop the sideboard. "He's as fierce a warrior as I've ever seen."

"Oh my, that is saying something, with Duncan Campbell as our brother and the Highland Enforcers always mulling about Kilchurn Castle."

Helen dabbed a bit of the oil behind her ear. "True." There was sadness in her voice.

Gyllis placed a palm on her sister's arm. "Is he tender with you?"

"Not really." A wee tear glistened at the corner of Helen's eye. "If anything he's gruff. But I needn't worry overmuch. Thus far, he's not been around long enough for it to be a bother."

Gyllis pulled Helen into her arms. It didn't seem right for her to be so happy when her sister was not.

"Enough of that." Helen backed away and grasped Gyllis's shoulders. "We are here to celebrate your marriage to Sir Sean MacDougall this day. At least one of us caught the man of our dreams."

"And you must know you are welcome at Dunollie at any time with or without your warrior husband."

"Thank you. One never knows. I may end up on your stoop with a satchel over my shoulder."

Gyllis dabbed Helen's eye with a kerchief. "I'm sure things will

improve."

"Aye, Mother said the same. She told me the first year is always the worst. As you recall, hers was an arranged marriage, and things did not start well between her and Da."

Gyllis chuckled. "I remember the stories well."

A rap came at the door. "It is time." Duncan stepped inside. "Are you ready?"

Butterflies flitted in Gyllis's stomach as she glanced around the room. "I was ready sennights ago."

Sean hadn't been this nervous when he went before the king on the day of his knighthood. Why he was anxious at all baffled him. He loved Gyllis, and had waited throughout an agonizing month while her mother invited half of Scotland to the wedding feast…but still, he paced in front of the altar.

It seemed like an eternity had passed since Duncan had left to fetch Gyllis. What if she suddenly had a change of mind? Sean clenched his fist. *Gyllis wouldn't do that.*

The church pews were filled with people. In fact there were so many in attendance, groups stood at the back of the nave. *Where did they all hail from*?

John Campbell took his place in front of the altar, holding a black prayer book. "You could sit until they arrive. You look like a caged dog."

Sean shot the priest an annoyed glare. But he did sit—for about two blinks of an eye and then he was back on his feet. "Sitting only makes it worse."

John frowned—probably because he thought he should. If the former knight hadn't gone off and joined the priesthood, he'd be laughing and giving the Dunollie Chieftain a good rib about now.

When the double doors finally opened, Sean held his breath. Duncan led Gyllis inside and they stood at the rear of the aisle. She smiled. Sean's insides melted. By God, she was stunning. Wearing a golden headdress, the silken wimple framed her face, enhancing her vivacious coloring. Green eyes, pink cheeks, lips as red as rubies. She wore a high-collared, woven red-and-gold mantle over a silken kirtle that made her look as regal as the queen. When they proceeded down the aisle, Sean hardly noticed her limp. God, she was amazing. It hadn't even been a half-year since she'd contracted paralysis and look how far she'd come.

By the time she arrived beside him, Sean's nervousness had been replaced by complete and utter adoration. Duncan offered her hand and he grasped it, hoping never to let go. "I've missed you."

Her radiant smile melted yet another piece of his heart. Gyllis

inclined her lips toward his ear. “I though this past month would never pass.”

“I cannot wait until the feast is over so I can whisk you above stairs,” he whispered out the corner of his mouth.

She leaned into him and winked. “But we shall need sustenance first.”

If he hadn’t been in a church, Sean would have burst out laughing.

John cleared his throat. “Shall we begin?”

Sean gave a nod and the Latin mass commenced. There was only one thing he could focus on, and that was the face of the incredible woman who stood before him. How such a lady could love a man such as he, the Chieftain of Dunollie—former Lusty Laddie—he would never know, but he loved her with a fire so passionate the torch he carried for Gyllis could never be snuffed.

Author's Note

Thank you for joining me for Gyllis and Sean's journey. This was an interesting story to write, indeed. Because there are so many people named John in this series, I used "Sean" for the hero's first name. As you may have guessed, the 11th Chieftain of Dunollie was John MacDougall, of MacDougall. I also left the date of this story ambiguous, because I believe John was much older when he actually married Gyllis Campbell.

The facts in the genealogy record do detail that John MacDougall's uncle, the Lord of Lorn (also named John) asked for protection from the MacDougall Clan during his wedding at Dunstaffnage Chapel. Alan MacCoul, MacDougall's illegitimate brother, stabbed Lorn outside the chapel doors. The Lord of Lorn took his vows while he was dying, thus granting his son the lordship. Alan MacCoul then laid siege to Dunstaffnage Castle and did imprison John MacDougall in irons on the Isle of Kerrera where he almost died.

The Campbells (reported as being led by Colin Campbell, the Lord of Argyll) fought and reclaimed Dunstaffnage, and Alan MacCoul is said to have slipped away. The record says nothing about who actually rescued John MacDougall from the cave, thus it was convenient to have Gyllis perform that act of heroism.

Next up in the Highland Dynasty series is Lady Helen and her abominable marriage to Aleck MacIain. With luck, Eoin MacGregor might perform his own acts of heroism in *Highland Knight of Rapture*.

Excerpt from Amy's Next Release:
HIGHLAND KNIGHT OF RAPTURE
Highland Dynasty Series ~ Book Four

Chapter One

Mingary Castle, the Highlands. March, 1493

Clenching every muscle in her body, Helen bore down with her remaining shreds of strength. She'd crossed the threshold of her endurance hours ago. Pain no longer mattered. After twenty-four hours of labor, she needed to expunge this bairn from her womb if it killed her, which may very well come about.

Her body shuddered as she shrieked through her grating voice box, pushing until her eyes bulged. "I…" she panted. "Cannot. Take. Anymore!"

"You can," Glenda shouted. "Just a bit longer, m'lady."

Helen sucked in a gasp of air. If she weren't on the brink of death, she'd give her chambermaid a strong rebuttal. But before she could open her mouth, the blinding pain intensified. Panting, she gripped the bed linens and clenched her teeth so taut, they might just shatter. "Eeeeeeee," she screeched.

"I see the head, m'lady. Keep. Pushing!"

Helen loved Glenda, but by the saints, the woman had to be the spawn of the devil to encourage this mounting torture.

Straining so hard her skull throbbed, Helen gulped one more deep breath and pushed. This had to be the end. Swooning, she could take no more. Stars darted through her vision. Her insides ripped and tore. Many women died in childbirth.

Would she, too?

Blessed Mother Mary, help me, I must survive.

Then as if her prayer had been answered, the bairn slid out between her legs. Her pain subsided.

Helen collapsed against the pillows.

A slap resounded through the chamber. A wee cry sang out.

Helen's heart soared.

"'Tis a lass, m'lady."

She could have floated to the canopy above. Pushing the sweat-soaked hair from her brow, Helen smiled. "A wee lassie?" Joyful tears welled in her eyes. Suddenly, all the pain and agony seemed worthwhile as the infant's angelic voice gasped and cried. It was the most delightful sound she'd ever heard. She reached up. "I want to

hold her."

"Let me finish cleansing her, and then you can make the bond," Glenda said from across the chamber.

With a sigh, Helen gazed at the scarlet canopy above. She'd never been so elated, yet so exhausted.

Glenda came into view, a wide grin on her careworn face. She settled the bairn in Helen's waiting arms. "What will you call the lass, m'lady?"

Helen regarded the beet-red infant yawning at her. She had a tiny bow-shaped mouth, enormous blue eyes and a smattering of black curls atop her head. "You shall be named Margaret after my mother, but I shall call you Maggie, because you are the most adorable wee bairn I have ever seen." She kissed the top of her daughter's head. "And your second name shall be Alice after my younger sister. I like the sound of *Alice* ever so much."

With a fragrance as fresh as morning's dew, Maggie turned her head toward Helen's breast and nudged.

"She can smell your milk, m'lady." Glenda untied Helen's linen shift and opened the front. "Hold Maggie to your teat. She'll ken what to do."

Helen moved the bairn in place, and just as Glenda had said, Maggie started to suckle. But it burned. Alarmed, Helen gasped and shot a panicked look at her chambermaid.

"Do not worry, m'lady. It stings a bit at first, but eases as soon as your milk starts to flow."

Again, Glenda was right and the stinging lessened as quickly as it had come on.

Watching the miracle in her arms, Helen sighed. "I do not ken what I would do without you, Glenda. You are so wise with these things."

"Aye?" The chambermaid chuckled. "Having three bairns of my own gave me all the learning I needed, I suppose."

Helen stiffened when the door opened. Her husband strode into the chamber, his heavy boots clomping over the floorboards while the sword and dirk belted at his waist clanked against his iron hauberk. She would never grow accustomed to Aleck MacIain's harsh mien. With a bald head and black steely eyes, she'd yet to discover his compassionate side, despite five years of marriage. That the bulky man entered wearing his weapons, along with muddy boots, spoke volumes about his lack of respect for her.

Though Helen's skin crawled, she feigned a smile—the same one she always used to mask her fear. "Come meet your daughter, m'laird."

He stopped mid-stride and glared. "You mean to tell me that after

five miserable years of waiting, you only manage to produce a lass?"

Helen tensed and glanced to Glenda. The chambermaid met her gaze with a frown, then snapped her attention to gathering the soiled linens. No one in the clan dared confront the Chieftain of Mingary, lest they be turned out to fend for themselves. A knot clamped in Helen's stomach. Aleck may be a tyrant toward her, but he would respect their daughter. "She is our firstborn—a lovely, healthy bairn. 'Tis not always a misfortune for a daughter to come first. We will have other children, of that I am certain."

He dropped his gaze to her exposed breast and frowned. "I have misgivings about your ability to be successful at bearing lads, given the length of time it took to conceive a lass." He grunted. "At least you've gained some shape to your udders, though I doubt they'll stay that way."

Helen turned her face away, heat prickling the back of her neck. Bless it, she'd just birthed *his* bairn, and he hadn't a kind word to say? She bit back the tears threatening to well in her eyes. A long time ago, she'd vowed Aleck MacIain would not make her weep. She'd spent every day of the past five years trying to please him—looking at every insult as another chance to better herself. But her efforts had never been enough.

If only I could do something to make him like me.

She regarded the helpless bairn in her arms. Hit with an overwhelming urge to protect Maggie, she pulled the comforter over the lass to shield the child and her breast from Aleck's stare.

Glenda clapped her hands. "I'm afraid Lady Helen is very weak, m'laird. She has lost a great deal of blood and needs her rest."

Aleck's gaze darted to the chambermaid as if about to spit out a rebuke. But his lips formed a thin line and he nodded. With one last odious look at Helen, he turned on his heel and left.

Helen allowed herself to breathe.

Glenda dashed to the side of the bed. "I'm ever so sorry, m'lady."

"'Tis not your fault. I kent Sir Aleck wanted a lad." Helen smoothed her hand over Maggie's downy soft curls as the bairn continued to suckle. "He just doesn't ken how precious a lass can be."

"No, he does not. I doubt he ever will."

"Wheesht, Glenda," Helen admonished.

The woman crossed her arms. "I'll not pretend. I disprove of his boorishness, especially toward you, m'lady."

Her serving maid had never been quite so forthright. Helen should scold her further, but presently she hadn't the wherewithal to do so. At long last, she held Maggie in her arms and even Aleck MacIain could not quash the joy in her heart. Helen grinned. "She is beautiful, is she not?"

“A more precious bairn does not exist.” Glenda reached in. “’Tis time for her to suckle on the other side.”

End of excerpt from Highland Knight of Rapture

Other Books by Amy Jarecki:

Highland Force Series:
Captured by the Pirate Laird
The Highland Henchman
Beauty and the Barbarian
Return of the Highland Laird (A Highland Force Novella)

Highland Dynasty Series:
Knight in Highland Armor
A Highland Knight's Desire
Highland Knight of Rapture

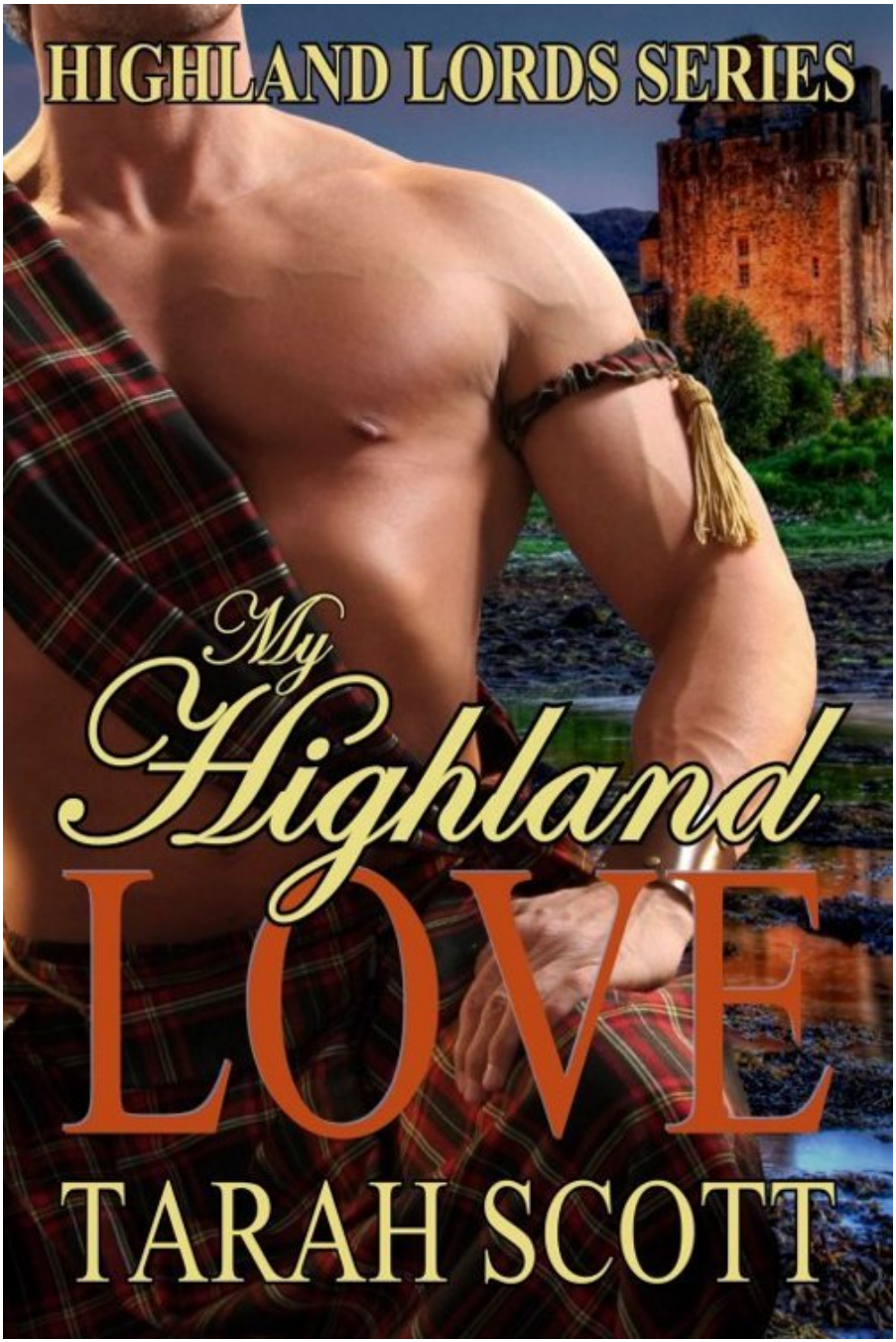
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If you enjoyed *A Highland Knight to Remember*, we would be honored if you would consider leaving a review. *~Thank you!*

About the Author

A descendant of an ancient Lowland clan, Amy adores Scotland. Though she now resides in southwest Utah, she received her MBA from Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. Winning multiple writing awards, she found her niche in the genre of Scottish historical romance, writing steamy edge-of-your-seat action adventures with rugged men and fascinating women who weave their paths through the brutal eras of centuries past. Amy loves hearing from her readers and can be contacted through her website at www.amyjarecki.com.


HIGHLAND LORDS SERIES
My Highland LOVE
TARAH SCOTT

My Highland Love

Highland Lords Series

Tarah Scott



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Reviews

The chemistry between these two characters will leave you breathless! This is one book I will defiantly read over and over! *Starry Night Book Reviews*

The story is not only well written, but flows at just the perfect pace.One of the most important things in this genre is chemistry between the characters. My Highland Love's Marcus and Elise will set fire to the pages, or your e-reader screen! It's romantic and sensual with a good dose of suspense and action added in. Set in the beautiful Scottish Highlands this tale of love and second chances truly shines among other Highland novels. If you're looking for the next greatest Highland tale, pick this one up! *Kristina Haeker's Reviews*

My Highland Love by Tarah Scott is a great story. I like the fact that Elise is not some wayward, whiny virgin, she is a woman with a past, a woman with her tragedies that make her evolve into the lass that Marcus comes to love. I adore Marcus being an older man with an 18 year old son and loads of responsibilities. *Book Obsessed Chicks*

The erotic chemistry between Marcus and Elise is sizzling hot and definitely will raise your heart level up a notch or two with their courting chase. The ending was brilliant; my emotions were running wild with sadness one moment and gasping but ending with a great big smile on my face for the happy ever after. Excellent Read. *Queentutt*

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my two very good friends and critique partners, Kimberly Comeau and Evan Trevane. You guys read this book above and beyond the call of duty. Thank you.

Chapter One

America
Winter 1825

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." Or so her eulogy would begin.

The heavy gold wedding band clinked loudly in the silence as he grasped the crystal tumbler sitting on the desk before him. He raised the glass in salutation and whispered into the darkness, "To the dead, may they rot in their watery graves." He finished the whiskey in one swallow.

And what of that which had been hers? He smiled. The law would see that her wealth remained where it should—with him. A finality settled about the room.

Soon, life would begin.

* * * *

Solway Firth, Scottish-English border

Elise jumped at the sound of approaching footsteps and sloshed tea from the cup at her lips. The ship's stateroom door opened and her grip tightened around the delicate cup handle. Her husband ducked to miss the top of the doorway as he entered. He stopped, his gaze fixing on the medical journal that lay open on the secretary beside her. A corner of his mouth curved upward with a derisive twist and his eyes met hers.

With deliberate disinterest, Elise slipped the paper she'd been making notes on between the pages of the journal and took the forestalled sip of afternoon tea. She grimaced. The tea had grown cold in the two hours it had sat untouched. She placed the cup on the saucer, then turned a page in the book. As Robert clicked the door shut behind him, the ship's stern lifted with another wave. She gripped the desk when the stern dropped into the swell's trough. Thunder, the first on the month-long voyage, rumbled. She released the desk. This storm had grown into more than a mere squall.

Robert stepped to her side. "What are you doing?"

"Nothi—" He snatched the paper from the book. "Robert!" She would have leapt to her feet, but her legs were shakier than her hands.

He scanned the paper, then looked at her. "You refuse to let the matter lie."

"You don't care that the doctors couldn't identify what killed your daughter?"

"She is dead. What difference can it possibly make?"

Her pulse jumped. *None for you. Because you murdered her.*

He tossed the paper aside. "This has gone far enough."

Elise lifted her gaze to his face. She once thought those blue eyes so sensual. "I couldn't agree more."

"Indeed?"

The ship heaved.

"I will give you a divorce," she said.

"Divorce?" A hard gleam entered his eyes. "I mean to be a widower."

She caught sight of the bulge in his waistband. Her pulse quickened. Why hadn't she noticed the pistol when he entered?

Elise shook her head. "You can't possibly hope to succeed. Steven will—"

"Your illustrious brother is in the bowels of the ship, overseeing the handling of the two crewmen accused of theft."

Her blood chilled. When her father was alive, he made sure the men employed by Landen Shipping were of good reputation. Much had changed since his death.

"One of the men is wanted for murder," Robert said.

"Murder?" she blurted. "Why would a stranger murder me?"

Robert lifted a lock of her dark hair. "Not a stranger. A spurned lover." He dropped the hair, then gripped the arms of her chair and leaned forward. "Once the board members of Landen Shipping identify your body as Elisabeth Kingston, the stipulation in your father's will shall be satisfied and your stock is mine."

The roar of blood pounded through her ears. If he killed her now, he would never pay for murdering their daughter. And she intended that he pay.

Elise lunged for the letter opener lying in one of the secretary compartments. The ship pitched as her fingers clamped onto the makeshift weapon. As Robert yanked her to her feet, she swung the letter opener. Bone-deep pain raced up her arm when the hard mass of his forearm blocked her blow. The letter opener clattered to the wooden floor.

She glimpsed his rage-contorted features before he whipped her around and crushed her to his chest, pinning her arms to her sides with one powerful arm. He dragged her two paces and snatched up the woolen scarf lying on the bed. In one swift movement, he wound it around her neck.

Robert released her waist, grabbed the scarf's dangling end, and yanked it tight around her neck. Elise clawed at the scarf. Her nails dug into the soft skin of her neck. Her legs buckled and he jerked her against him. His knees jabbed into her back and jolts of pain shot up both sides of her spine. She gulped for air.

His breath was thick in her ear as he whispered, "Did you really think we would let you control fifty-one percent of Landen Shipping?" He gave a vicious yank on the scarf.

No! her mind screamed in tandem with another thunder roll. Too late, she understood the lengths to which he would go to gain control of her inheritance.

The scarf tightened. Her sight dimmed. Cold. She was so cold.

Amelia, my daughter, I come to you—the scarf went slack. Elise dropped to her knees, wheezing in convulsive gasps of air. Despite the racking coughs which shook her, she forced her head up. A blurry form stood in the doorway. *Steven.*

The scarf dropped to her shoulders and she yanked it from her neck. Robert stepped in front of her and reached into his coat. *The pistol.* He had murdered her daughter—he would not take Steven from her. Elise lunged forward and bit into his calf with the ferocity of a lioness.

Robert roared. The ship bucked. Locked like beast and prey, they tumbled forward and slammed against the desk chair. The chair broke with the force of their weight. The secretary lamp crashed to the floor. Whale oil spilled across the wooden floor; a river of fire raced atop the thin layer toward the bed.

Steven yanked her up and shoved her toward the door. Robert scrambled to his feet as Steven whirled and rammed his fist into Robert's jaw. Her husband fell against the doorjamb, nearly colliding with her. Elise jumped back with a cry. Robert charged Steven and caught him around the shoulders, driving him back onto the bed.

The ship bucked. Elise staggered across the cabin, hit her hip against the secretary, and fell. The medical journal thudded to the floor between her and the thick ribbon of fire. Her heart skipped a beat when Robert slammed his fist into Steven's jaw.

She reached for the open book and glimpsed the picture of the belladonna, the deadly nightshade plant. Fury swept through her anew. She snatched up the book, searing the edge of her palm on the fire as she pushed to her feet. Elise leapt forward, book held high, and swung at Robert with all her strength. *May* this *belladonna kill you as your powdered belladonna killed our daughter*. The crack of book against skull penetrated the ringing in her ears. Robert fell limp atop Steven.

The discarded scarf suddenly blazed. Elise whirled. Smoke choked her as fire burned the bed coverings only inches from Robert's hand. Steven grabbed her wrist and dragged her toward the door. He scooped up the pistol as they crossed the threshold and they stumbled down the corridor to the ladder leading up to the deck.

"Go!" he yelled, and lifted her onto the first tread.

Elise frantically pulled herself up the steep ladder to the door

and shoved it upward. Rain pelted her like tiny needles. She ducked her head down as she scrambled onto the deck. An instant later, Steven joined her. He whirled toward the poop deck where Captain Morrison and his first mate yelled at the crewmen who clung to the masts while furiously pulling up the remaining sails and lashing them to the spars.

Steven pulled her toward the poop deck's ladder. "Stay here!" he yelled above the howling wind, and forced her fingers around the side of the ladder.

The ship heaved to starboard as he hurried up the ladder and Elise hugged the riser. A wave broke over the railing and slammed her against the wood. She sputtered, tasting the tang of salt as she gasped for air.

A garbled shout from the captain brought her attention upward. He stared at two men scuttling down the mizzen mast. They landed, leapt over the railing onto the main deck and disappeared through the door leading to the deck below. They had gone to extinguish the fire. If they didn't succeed, the ship would go down.

Elise squinted through the rain at Steven. He leaned in close to the captain. The lamp, burning in the binnacle, illuminated the guarded glance the captain sent her way. A shock jolted her. Robert had lied to the captain about her—perhaps had even implicated Steven in her so-called insanity. The captain's expression darkened. He faced his first mate.

The ship's bow plunged headlong into a wave with a force that threw Elise to the deck and sent her sliding across the slippery surface. Steven shouted her name as she slammed into the ship's gunwale. Pain shot through her shoulder. He rushed down the ladder, the captain on his heels. Another wave hammered the ship. Steven staggered to her side and pulled her to her feet. The ship lurched. Elise clutched at her brother as they fell to the deck. Pain radiated through her arm and up her shoulder. The door to below deck swung open. Elise froze.

Robert.

He pointed a pistol at her. Her heart leapt into her throat. Steven sprang to his feet in front of her.

"No!" she screamed.

She spotted the pistol lying inches away and realized it had fallen from Steven's waistband. She snatched up the weapon, rolled to face Robert, and fired. The report of the pistol sounded in unison with another shot.

A wave cleared the railing. Steven disappeared in the wash of seawater. Elise grasped the cold wood railing and pulled herself to her feet. She blinked stinging saltwater from her eyes and took a startled step backwards at seeing her husband laying across the threshold.

Steven lay several feet to her right. She drew a sharp breath. A dark patch stained his vest below his heart. *Dear God, where had the bullet lodged?*

She started toward Steven. The ship listed hard to port. She fought the backward momentum and managed two steps before another wave crested. The deck lurched and she was airborne. She braced for impact against the deck. Howling wind matched her scream as she flew past the railing and plummeted into darkness—then collided with rock-hard water.

Cold clamped onto her. Rain beat into the sea with quick, heavy blows of a thousand tiny hammers. She kicked. Thick, icy ribbons of water propelled her upward. She blinked. Murky shapes glided past. This was Amelia's grave. Elise surfaced, her first gasp taking in rainwater. She coughed and flailed. A heavy sheet of water towered, then slapped her against the ocean's surface. The wave leveled and she shook hair from her eyes. Thirty feet away, the *Amelia* bounced on the waves like a toy. Her brother had named the ship. But Amelia was gone. Steven, only twenty-two, was also gone.

A figure appeared at the ship's railing. The lamp high atop the poop deck burned despite the pouring rain. Elise gasped. Could he be —"Steven!" she yelled, kicking hard in an effort to leap above another towering wave. Her skirts tangled her legs, but she kicked harder, waving both arms. The man only hacked at the bow rope of the longboat with a sword. "Steven!" she shouted.

The bow of the longboat dropped, swinging wildly as the man staggered the few steps to the rope holding the stern. A wave crashed over Elise and she surfaced to see the longboat adrift and the figure looking out over the railing. Her heart sank. The light silhouetted the man—and the captain's hat he wore. Tears choked her. It had been the captain and not Steven.

Elise pulled her skirts around her waist and knotted them, then began swimming toward the boat. Another wave grabbed the *Amelia*, tossing her farther away. The captain's hat lifted with the wind and sailed into the sea. She took a quick breath and dove headlong into the wave that threatened to throw her back the way she'd come. She came up, twisting frantically in the water until she located the ship. She swam toward the longboat, her gaze steady on the *Amelia*. Then the lamp dimmed… and winked out.

Chapter Two

Scottish Highlands
Spring 1826

England lay far behind him, though not far enough. Never far enough. Marcus breathed deep of the crisp spring air. The scents of pine and heather filled his nostrils. Highland air. None sweeter existed. His horse nickered as if in agreement, and Marcus brushed a hand along the chestnut's shoulder.

"It is good to be home," Erin spoke beside him.

Grunts of agreement went up from the six other men riding in the company, and Marcus answered, "Aye," despite the regret of leaving his son in the hands of the Sassenach.

He surveyed the wooded land before him—MacGregor land. Bought with Ashlund gold, held by MacGregor might, and rich with the blood of his ancestors.

"If King George has his way," Erin said, "your father will follow the Duchess of Sutherland's example and lease this land to the English."

Marcus jerked his attention onto the young man. Erin's broad grin reached from ear to ear, nearly touching the edges of his thick mane of dark hair. The lad read him too easily.

"These roads are riddled with enough thieves," Marcus said with a mock scowl. His horse shifted, muscles bunching with the effort of cresting the hill they ascended. "My father is no more likely to give an inch to the English than I am to give up the treasure I have tucked away in these hills."

"What?" Erin turned to his comrades. "I told you he hid Ashlund gold without telling us." Marcus bit back a laugh when the lad looked at him and added, "Lord Phillip still complains highwaymen stole his daughter's dowry while on the way to Edinburgh." He gave Marcus a comical look that said *you know nothing of that, do you?*

"Lord Allerton broke the engagement after highwaymen stole the dowry," put in another of the men. "Said Lord Phillip meant to cheat him."

"Lord Allerton is likely the thief," Marcus said. "The gold was the better part of the bargain."

"Lord Phillip's daughter is an attractive sort," Erin mused. "Much like bread pudding. Sturdy, with just the right jiggle."

A round of guffaws went up and one aging warrior cuffed Erin across the back of his neck. They gained the hill and Marcus's laughter died at sight of the figure hurrying across the open field below. He

gave an abrupt signal for silence. The men obeyed and only the chirping of spring birds filled the air.

* * * *

"Tavis," Elise snapped, finally within hearing range of the boy and his sister, "this time you've gone too far and have endangered your sister by leaving the castle."

His attention remained fixed on the thickening woods at the bottom of the hill and her frustration gave way to concern. They were only minutes from the village—a bare half an hour from the keep and safely on MacGregor land—but the boy had intended to go farther—much farther. He had just turned fourteen, old enough to carry out the resolve to find the men who had murdered his father, and too young to understand the danger.

Bonnie tugged on her cloak and Elise looked down at her. The little girl grinned and pointed to the wildflowers surrounding them. Elise smiled, then shoved back the hood of her cloak. Bonnie squatted to pick the flowers. Elise's heart wrenched. If only their father still lived. He would teach Tavis a lesson. Of course, if Shamus still lived, Tavis wouldn't be hunting for murderers.

Those men were guilty of killing an innocent, yet no effort had been made to bring them to justice. The disquiet that always hovered close to the surface caused a nervous tremor to ripple through her stomach. While Shamus's murderers would likely never go before a judge, if Price found her, his version of justice would be in the form of a noose around her neck for the crime of defending herself against a man who had tried to kill her—twice.

Any doubts about her stepfather's part in Amelia's death had been dispelled a month after arriving at Brahan Seer when she read a recent edition of the London *Sunday Times* brought by relatives for Michael MacGregor. She found no mention of the *Amelia's* sinking. Instead, a ten thousand pound reward for information leading to the whereabouts of her *body* was printed in the announcements section.

Reward? Bounty is what it was.

The advertisement gave the appearance that Price was living up to his obligations as President of Landen Shipping. But she knew he intended she reach Boston dead—and reach Boston she would, for without her body, he would have to wait five years before taking control of her fifty-one percent of Landen Shipping. She intended to slip the noose over his head first.

Elise caught sight of her trembling fingers, and her stomach heaved with the memory of Amelia's body sliding noiselessly from the ship into the ocean. She choked back despair. If she had suspected

that Robert had been poisoning her daughter even a few months earlier—

"Flowers!"

Elise jerked at Bonnie's squeal. The girl stood with a handful of flowers extended toward her. Elise brushed her fingers across the white petals of the stitchwort and the lavender butterwort. She was a fool to involve herself with the people here, but when Shamus was murdered she been unable to remain withdrawn.

"Riders," Tavis said.

Elise tensed. "Where?"

"There." Tavis pointed into the trees.

She leaned forward and traced the line of his arm with her gaze. A horse's rump slipped out of sight into the denser forest. Goose bumps raced across her arms.

Elise straightened and yanked Bonnie into her arms "It will be dark soon—" Tavis faced her and she stopped short when his gaze focused on something behind her.

Elise looked over her shoulder. Half a dozen riders emerged from the forest across the meadow. She started. Good Lord, what had possessed her to leave Brahan Seer without a pistol? She was as big a fool as Tavis and without the excuse of youth. She slid Bonnie to the ground as the warriors approached. They halted fifteen feet away. Elise edged Bonnie behind her when one of the men urged his horse closer. Her pulse jumped. Was it possible to become accustomed to the size of these Highland men?

She flushed at the spectacle of his open shirt but couldn't stop her gaze from sliding along the velvety dark hair that trailed downward and tapered off behind a white lawn shirt negligently tucked into his kilt. The large sword strapped to his hip broke the fascination.

How many had perished at the point of that weapon?

The hard muscles of his chest and arms gave evidence—many.

The man directed a clipped sentence in Gaelic to Tavis. The boy started past her, but she caught his arm. The men wore the red and green *plaide* of her benefactors the MacGregors, but were strangers.

"What do you want?" She cursed the curt demand that had bypassed good sense in favor of a willing tongue.

Except for a flicker of surprise across the man's face, he sat unmoving.

Elise winced inwardly, remembering her American accent, but said in a clear voice, "I asked what you want."

Leather groaned when he leaned forward on his saddle. He shifted the reins to the hand resting in casual indolence on his leg and replied in English, "I asked the boy why he is unarmed outside the

castle with two females."

Caught off guard by the deep vibrancy of his soft burr, her heart skipped a beat. "We don't need weapons on MacGregor land." She kept her tone unhurried.

"The MacGregor's reach extends as far as the solitude of this glen?" he asked.

"We are only fifteen minutes from the village," she said. "But his reach is well beyond this place."

"He is great, indeed," the warrior said.

"You know him?"

"I do."

She lifted Bonnie. "Then you know he would wreak vengeance on any who dared harm his own."

"Aye," the man answered. "The MacGregor would hunt them down like dogs. Only," he paused, "how would he know who to hunt?"

She gave him a disgusted look. "I tracked these children. You think he cannot track you?"

"A fine point," he agreed.

"Good." She took a step forward. "Now, we will be getting home."

"Aye, you should be getting home." He urged his horse to intercept. Elise set Bonnie down, shoving her in Tavis's direction. "And," the man went on, "we will take you." The warriors closed in around them. "The lad will ride with Erin. Give the little one to Kyle, and you," his eyes came back hard on Elise, "will ride with me."

The heat in his gaze sent a flush through her, but her ire piqued. "We do not accept favors from strangers."

His gaze unexpectedly deepened.

She stilled. *What the devil? Was that amusement on his face?*

"We are not strangers," he said. There was no mistaking the laughter in his eyes now. "Are we, Tavis?" His gaze shifted to the boy.

"Nay," he replied with a shy smile. "No' strangers at all, laird."

"You know this man?" Elise asked.

"He is the laird's son."

"Marcus!" Bonnie cried, peeking from behind Elise's skirts.

Elise looked at him. Marcus? *This* was the son Cameron had spoken of with such affection these past months? It suddenly seemed comical that she had doubted Cameron's stories of his son's exploits on the battlefield. She had believed the aging chief's stories were exaggerations, but the giant of a man before her was clearly capable of every feat with which his father had credited him.

Prodded by the revelation, she discerned the resemblance between father and son. Though grey sprinkled Cameron's hair, the two shared the same unruly, dark hair, the same build… and… "You

have his eyes," she said.

He chuckled.

Heat flooded her cheeks. She pulled Bonnie into her arms. "You might have said who you were." She gave him an assessing look. "Only that wouldn't have been half as much fun. Who will take the child?"

His gaze fixed on the hand she had wrapped around Bonnie and the small burn scar that remained as a testament of her folly. His attention broke when a voice from behind her said in a thick brogue, ""Tis me ye be looking for, lass." She turned to a weathered warrior who urged his mount forward.

Elise handed Bonnie up to him. Stepping back, she bumped into the large body of a horse. Before she could move, an arm encircled her from behind, pulling her upward across hard thighs. A tremor shot through her. She hadn't been this close to a man's body since—since those first months of her seven-year marriage.

Panic seized her in a quick, hard rush. The trees blurred as her mind plunged backward in time to the touch of the man who had promised till death do them part. Her husband's gentle hand on their wedding night splintered into his violent grip the night he'd tried to murder her—the movement of thighs beneath her buttocks broke the trance as Marcus MacGregor spurred his horse into motion. His arms tightened around her and she held her breath, praying he couldn't hear her thudding heart.

The ambling movement of the bulky horse lifted her from Marcus's lap. She clutched at his shirt. Her knuckles brushed his bare chest and she jerked back as if singed by hot coals. Her body lifted again with the horse's next step and she instinctively threw her arms around Marcus's forearm. His hold tightened as rich laughter rumbled through his chest.

"Do not worry, lass. Upon pain of death, I swear, you will not slip from my arms until your feet touch down at Brahan Seer."

Elise grimaced, then straightened in an effort to shift from the sword hilt digging into her back.

"What's wrong?" He leaned her back in his arms and gazed down at her.

She stared. Robert had never looked so—she sat upright. "I've simply never ridden a horse in this manner."

"There are many ways to ride a horse, lass," he said softly.

Elise snapped her gaze to his face, then jerked back when her lips nearly brushed his. She felt herself slip and clutched at his free arm even as the arm around her crushed her closer. Her breasts pressed against his chest where his shirt lay open. Heat penetrated her bodice, hardening her nipples. A surprising warmth sparked between her legs. She caught sight of his smile an instant before she dropped

her gaze.

* * * *

Their ascent steepened. Marcus closed the circle of his arms around the woman's waist. She leaned into him. It was a shame she wore a cloak. Without it, her bare arms would lay against his chest. He hardened. *Bloody hell.* Shift even a hair's breadth and the challenge he'd seen in her gaze an hour ago would resurface, accompanied by a slap across his face.

She had betrayed no fear when he came upon her—other than her open assessment of his weapon. Odd his sword should be what frightened her. She must have known if he meant mischief, he needed no weapon save his body. An erotic picture arose of her straddling him, breasts arched so he could suckle each until she begged him to lift her onto his erection.

He forced back the vision and focused on her determination to defend the children with her life… or perhaps, her body. He smiled, then gritted his teeth when he further hardened at the memory of her leaning over Tavis's shoulders as she scanned the forest for the riders he'd sent. Hands braced on her knees, her posture revealed the curve of a firm derriere.

When she turned at their approach, the wind had blown her brown hair about her shoulders, bringing his attention to the sensual curve of modest breasts visible just above the edge of her bodice. He envisioned hips tapering into long legs and wondered what those legs would feel like wrapped tightly around his waist while he thrust deep inside her.

Her accent had caught him off guard. What was an American woman doing on MacGregor land, and how had she come to know Tavis and Bonnie well enough to track them through the woods? Hot fury shot through him. The little fool. Had the wrong man come upon her, she might well have ended up like Katie.

The majestic heights of Brahan Seer's west tower abruptly loomed in the distance. Marcus's steed unexpectedly faltered, then steadied. The woman tensed and Marcus's body pulsed. He closed his eyes, breathed deep of her hair, then looked again at the tower. For the first time in his life, he regretted the sight. His ride with her cradled in his arms would soon end.

Higher they climbed, until Brahan Seer's walls became visible. The gates were open. At their approach, his captain Daniel hailed from the battlements. Marcus nodded as they rode through the entry. Inside the courtyard, he halted and Daniel appeared at his side.

"Elise," he addressed the woman, surprise apparent on his

features. He glanced at the children, his gaze lingering on Bonnie. His mouth tightened. "Mayhap Marcus can take a hand with you, Tavis. Get along, and take your sister. Your mother will be worried."

Marcus handed Elise down to him. Before Marcus's feet touched the ground, she had started toward the castle. He dismounted and clasped Daniel's hand while watching from the corner of his eye the sway of her cloak about her hips as she answered a welcoming smile from two of his men headed toward the stables.

"What were they doing out alone?" Marcus demanded of Daniel.

"I've ordered the boy not to go wandering the woods," he replied.

"And Bonnie?"

"This is the first. I imagine she chased after her brother."

Elise turned the corner around the castle and Marcus cut his gaze onto her the instant before she disappeared. Lust shot to the surface and tightened his shaft, but he turned back to Daniel. "Why is Shamus letting his children run wild—never mind. I'll speak to him. You look well."

Daniel hesitated, then said, "Chloe is with child."

Marcus smiled in genuine pleasure. "Congratulations, man."

Daniel smiled, then took the reins as Marcus turned toward the castle.

Through the busy courtyard, he answered greetings, but his thoughts remained on the image of Elise as she vanished from sight. She had a forthright, strong quality. Yet—he bent his head to breathe her lingering scent from his clothes—the lavender bouquet in her hair was decidedly feminine. It would be some time before he forgot the feel of her buttocks across his thighs. But then, perhaps he wouldn't have to. Marcus entered the great hall to find his father sitting alone in his chair at the head of the table.

Cameron brightened. "So, ye decided to come home?"

Relaxing warmth rippled through Marcus.

"Tired of wandering the land?" Cameron made a wide sweeping gesture.

"You knew I was on my way, but, aye." He stopped at the chair to his father's right and lowered himself onto the seat. "I am pleased to be home."

"How is my grandson? I see you did not bring him with you."

Marcus sighed. "Nay, Father. You knew I wouldn't."

Cameron snorted. "We would not want to offend the mighty Sassenach."

"Father," Marcus said in a low tone.

Cameron shook his head. "The clan never asked you to concede to the English, you know. *I* never asked for it. Did you ever wonder if

the sacrifice is worth your son?"

"Aye," Marcus murmured. He'd wondered. Politics had ruled the MacGregor clan for centuries and that wasn't easily changed. He paused. "Have I been gone too long, or is something different about the great hall?"

"You have the right of it, lad." Eyes that mirrored his own looked back at him. "More than you can imagine."

Marcus looked about the room. "I can't quite place it. What's happened?"

Cameron took a long, exaggerated draught of ale.

"*Cameron.*"

"Enough of your looks, lad. They do not work with me." He chuckled. "I taught them to you. Remember? It is no mystery, really. Look around. When did you last see the tapestries so bright, the floors so clean?" He motioned toward the wall that ran the length of the room, framed by stairs on either end. "When have you seen the weapons so polished?"

Marcus scanned the nearly two hundred gleaming weapons mounted across the wall. He rose and walked the wall's length, perusing the weapons. Each one glistened, some nearly as bright as newly forged steel. He glanced at the floor. The stone looked as if it had just been laid.

He looked at his father. "What happened?"

"The women came one day—or rather, one month—and swept out the cobwebs, cleaned the floors, the tapestries, weapons."

Marcus rose and crossed the room to the kitchen door where the women worked. The housekeeper sat at the kitchen table. Ancient blue eyes, still shining with the bloom of youth, smiled back at him. Winnie had been present at his birth. Marcus knew she loved him like the son she'd never had. He, in turn, regarded her with as much affection as he had his own mother.

She turned her attention to the raw chicken she carved. "So, you've returned at last."

"Aye, milady."

A corner of her mouth twitched with amusement.

"I am looking forward to the company of some fine lasses tonight," he said. "'Tis a long and lonely trip I've had. Perhaps next time I shall take you with me." He gave her a roguish wink before striding back to his seat in the hall.

Marcus lowered himself into the chair he had occupied earlier. "Must have taken an army just to shine the weapons alone. Not to mention the walls and floors."

"It did. You will see the same throughout the castle. Not a room went untouched."

"Whatever possessed them to do it?"

"It was the hand of a sweet lass," Cameron replied.

"Which one? Not Winnie—"

"Nay. The lass Shannon and Josh found washed ashore on the coast. They brought her when they returned from the south."

"Washed ashore?"

"An American woman. Her ship perished in a fire."

"American?"

Cameron scowled. "Are you deaf? Shannon is the one who discovered her at Solway Firth."

"What in God's name was she doing there?"

Cameron gave his chin a speculative scratch. "Damned if I know. They were headed for London."

"London? Sailing through Solway Firth requires sailing around the north of Ireland. That would add a week or more to the journey."

His father's mouth twisted into a wry grin. "You know the English, probably got lost."

"I thought you said she was American."

"English, American, 'tis all the same." Cameron's expression sobered. "But dinna' mistake me, she is a fine lass. She came to us just after you left for Ashlund four months ago. You should have seen her when they brought her here. Proud little thing."

"Proud, indeed," Marcus repeated.

"'Tis what I said." Cameron eyed him. "Are you sure something isn't ailing you?"

Marcus shook his head.

"At first, she didn't say much," Cameron went on. "But I could see a storm brewed in her head. Then one day, she informed me Brahan Seer was in dire need of something." He sighed deeply. "She was more right than she knew."

Marcus understood his father's meaning. His mother's death five years ago had affected Cameron dramatically. Only last year had his father finally sought female comfort. The gaping hole created by her absence left them both thirsting for a firm, feminine hand.

"It's a miracle she survived the fire," Cameron said. "'Course, if you knew her, you would not be surprised."

"I believe I do," Marcus remarked.

"What? You only just arrived."

"I picked up passengers on the way home—Tavis, little Bonnie, and an American woman." Marcus related the tale. "I recognized her accent," he ended. "Got accustomed to it while on campaign in America."

Cameron smiled. "Elise is forever chasing after those children."

"Why?"

His father's expression darkened. "Shamus was murdered."

Marcus straightened. "Murdered?"

"Aye."

"By God, how—Lauren, what of her?"

Sadness softened the hard lines around his father's mouth. "She is fine, in body, but… her mind has no' been the same since Shamus died. We tried consoling her, but she will have none of it."

A tingling sensation crept up Marcus's back. "What happened?"

"We found him just over the border in Montal Cove with his skull bashed in."

"Any idea who did it?"

"Aye," Cameron said. "Campbells."

Marcus surged to his feet. He strode to the wall, where hung the claymore belonging to his ancestor Ryan MacGregor, the man who saved their clan from annihilation. Marcus ran a finger along the blade, the cold, hard steel heating his blood as nothing else could. Except… *Campbells*.

Had two centuries of bloodshed not been enough?

Fifty years ago, King George finally proclaimed the MacGregors no longer outlaws and restored their Highland name. General John Murray, Marcus's great uncle, was named clan chief. Only recently, the MacGregors were given a place of honor in the escort, which carried the "Honors of Scotland" before the sovereign. Marcus had been there, marching alongside his clansmen.

Too many dark years had passed under this cloud. Would the hunted feeling Ryan MacGregor experienced ever fade from the clan? Perhaps it would have been better if Helena hadn't saved Ryan that fateful day so long ago. But Ryan had lived, and his clan thrived, not by the sword, but by the timeless power of gold. Aye, the Ashlund name Helena gave Ryan saved them. Yet, Ryan MacGregor's soul demanded recompense.

How could Ryan rest while his people still perished?

Marcus removed his hand from the sword and faced his father. "It's time the MacGregors brought down the Campbell dogs."

* * * *

Feminine laughter spilled from the kitchen into the great hall during the evening meal. Marcus sighed with contentment. Light from sconces flickered like a great, filmy curtain across the room. Two serving girls carrying trays of food stepped from the kitchen, and the men, who blocked the doorway, parted. The sense of contentment came as an almost unconscious realization. He had missed sharing the evening meal with his clansmen. Marcus leaned forward, arms crossed

in front of him on the table, and returned his attention to the conversation with Cameron and Daniel.

"We will be ready at first light, laird," Daniel said.

"The Campbells will not be expecting trouble," Cameron put in.

"If word has reached them that I've returned, they may be," Marcus said.

Cameron grunted. "Lot of good it will do."

The feminine voice Marcus had been waiting for filtered out from within the kitchen. "Easy now, Andrea," Elise said.

The conversation between his father and Daniel faded as Marcus watched for her amongst the men who crowded between the door and table. The thought of seeing her beautiful body heated his blood. Elise stepped from the kitchen, balancing a plate of salmon. She passed the table's end where he sat and carefully picked her way through the men until reaching the middle of the table. She set the oval platter between the chicken and mutton.

"Beth, place the carrots to the left. Andrea—" She took the plate of potatoes from the girl, then set it to the right and turned toward the kitchen.

"Elise," one of the young warriors called, "come, talk with us, lass."

Her mouth quirked. "If I play with you, who will finish dinner?"

The man's hearty chuckle gave evidence she hadn't fooled him, and he approached with friends in tow.

Cameron stood. "Elise," he called over the men's heads, "come here."

She turned. When her gaze met Cameron's, warmth filled her eyes. She dried her hands on her apron and headed in his direction.

"Go on, lads," Cameron said to the men who teased her. "You have better things to do than dally with the lassies."

When she came within arm's reach, he gripped her shoulders. "Meet my son. He's returned today." He turned her.

Her gaze met Marcus's. Her smile faltered but quickly transformed into polite civility. "We've met."

"Oh?" Cameron replied, all innocence.

"Yes. He came by when Tavis, Bonnie, and I were on our way home this afternoon."

"Ahh," Cameron said, then turned and gave the man beside him an energetic greeting.

Elise looked again at Marcus and motioned toward the kitchen. "I have work to do."

"Aye," he said. The memory of her breasts pressed against his chest caused him to harden.

She backed up a few steps, then turned and ran headlong into

the man behind her. He reached to steady her. A flush colored her cheeks and Marcus bit back a laugh when she dodged the warrior. Marcus leaned forward, catching one last look at her backside before she disappeared through the kitchen door.

Chapter Three

At the sound of horses padding past the cottage she shared with Winnie, Elise looked up from the table where sat the teacup she had been refilling. She glanced from the curtained window to Winnie, who remained bent over her needlework. Elise took two steps to the fireplace, hooked the kettle over the fire, and went to the window. She pulled back the lace curtain to see a procession of warriors filing past the cottages.

Marcus MacGregor rode at the head of the company. He sat straight, his body shifting in easy motion with the horse's rhythmic movements. Her father had exuded the same careless confidence. Elise recalled her mother often watching from a window as he rode away. The warmth spreading through Elise now gave her an understanding of what her mother must have felt.

"Ridiculous," she muttered.

"What?" Winnie called, but she didn't answer, mesmerized as Marcus turned his profile to her and addressed the man to his left.

The edges of his dark hair curled along the line of his ear and down his neck. He smiled. The remembered feel of his solid chest against her breasts arose with surprising intensity. What would his chest feel like beneath her fingers? Her pulse quickened. Where had that thought come from? Marcus's horse disappeared around a sharp turn in the path. Elise surveyed the long line of men following.

"Where are they going?" she murmured.

"To the Hastings Campbells," Winnie said.

"I thought the MacGregors and Campbells were feuding."

"They are."

The last of the men disappeared from view. "Why go then?"

"To deal with Shamus's murderer."

Elise swung her gaze back to Winnie. "Shamus has been dead two months. Why has Cameron waited so long to bring the guilty man before the law?"

"Cameron *is* the law," Winnie replied.

A tremor rippled through Elise. Price, too, had appointed himself law. "How can Cameron be impartial? It is his kin who was murdered."

The housekeeper grunted. "How impartial should he be?"

"Surely he wouldn't kill in cold blood?"

Winnie's head snapped up. "Cold blood? What the Campbells done—killing Shamus—*that* was cold blood."

Elise realized she had crushed the curtain and released it. She crossed to the table and grasped the back of the chair across from

Winnie. "Has Cameron identified the killer?"

"Each kinsman is responsible for the other."

Elise stared. "Have you any idea what you are saying?"

"Every Highlander will tell you the same."

"Even the Highlands of Scotland can't be so uncivilized as to seek recompense of the guilty party's neighbors. The man who committed the crime, he alone is responsible."

"Mayhap," Winnie said as she squinted at the tiny stitching. "But his kinsmen would have to hand him over to his accusers, and the Campbells are not known for thinking themselves guilty for ridding the world of a MacGregor."

Elise kept her tight grip on the chair. Would the MacGregors hand her over to Price? Would the ten thousand pound reward sway them? "So an entire clan will suffer for one man's wickedness?"

"'Tis a funny thing you'll find in the clans," Winnie said, her attention intent on the sewing. "Some do nothing but fight. Others are peaceful, while some are just plain scoundrels. Whatever they are, 'tis generally agreed amongst themselves. Like begets like. If a man differs, he can take refuge elsewhere."

Warmth rippled through Elise. Just as she had taken refuge here. She watched Winnie stitch the intricate needlework on the linen blanket meant for Chloe's new baby. How much like her were these people? Sadness wound through her. What did it matter? When Price finally believed she had perished at sea and stopped advertising the notice, she would then board a ship without fear a bounty hunter was looking for her. Her wedding band, hidden behind a loose stone in the ladies' drawing room, would buy passage to America. There she would testify that she shot Robert in defense of her brother and herself.

Would her word be enough? She wasn't the only person who had survived the sinking of the *Amelia*. Someone had reported to Price that she shot Robert. Was that person friend or foe? Would that person try to stop her from bringing Price Ardsley to his knees? Elise startled at the realization that she intended to dispense her own brand of justice.

"Justice isn't always what it should be," she murmured.

Winnie snorted. "It is the law of the land—every land—and the Campbells know it. They're a bloodthirsty lot." Her countenance softened and she nodded toward her teacup. "Fill my cup."

The normalcy of the request loosened the tightening in Elise's stomach. She retrieved the kettle from the fire and poured hot water into Winnie's cup, then dropped in a tea ball.

"You canna' know," Winnie began, still working her stitching, "what it is to have everyone against ye, even your own king."

Elise returned the kettle to its place and seated herself at the

table. Her soul grew heavy at hearing how more than two hundred years ago the government gave the Campbells all MacGregor land, heedless of the fact the property was occupied.

"Even the MacGregor name was outlawed," Winnie said. "Our line would have died if not for Ryan MacGregor."

Winnie went on to tell how the foresight of a single man saved an entire people. Ryan MacGregor, traitor to the Scottish crown, married a woman wealthy enough to shun the insidious alliance of the merchants and government, then bought land and furnished his people with weapons to keep it.

"How he angered the Campbells," she said with satisfaction. "We still lived and died by the sword, mind you, for a Campbell cannot bear to see a MacGregor at peace. But we had a sword to fight with."

But the horror had only begun, Elise realized as Winnie went on. The political tide then turned against all Highlanders.

"Clearances, they call it. *Evictions*." Winnie jabbed her needle into the cloth. "*Murder*. Our chiefs evicted us. *Their own kin*. All in the name of *progress*. But the Duchess of Sutherland, she is the devil incarnate. Ninety families, she started with, but the numbers got as high as two thousand families in a single day."

Elise gasped. "Dear God, how is that possible?"

"It happened."

"Who is this duchess?"

"The most powerful woman in all Scotland—mayhap, the world. She owns tens of thousands of acres of land. When she realized ranching held better profit than farming, she began evictions. Thousands thrown out of their homes no matter their age or infirmity. Many were left by the wayside to die like animals. Not a family lives who hasn't been touched by the clearances. My great uncle Duncan McKay," Winnie's voice grew shaky, "he and his family, caught in the dead of night. Four bairns burned in their beds."

Elise's throat constricted at the picture of burning beds and children screaming for their parents.

Soundless tears rolled down Winnie's cheeks. "Duncan lived, poor devil, despite being nearly burned to death. They brought him here."

"Here?" Elise asked in a choked voice.

"Aye. My mother was Cameron's father's healer, then his for many years. But she couldna' do a thing for Duncan. He could have lived, or so she said, but the spirit died with his wife and children. There are others, but Duncan I remember best." She looked up "Have you ever seen a man burned?"

Unreasonable panic rose with the memory of the fire that had

so quickly spread across the *Amelia's* cabin floor. Elise shook her head.

"Pray you never do." Winnie returned to her embroidering. "The Campbells stood alongside the duchess. They had government *and* church sanction. We were to be broken, you see. It did not matter that our men fought for the crown while their families died at home. We never bowed to their authority and that pricked them."

"And the Campbells," Elise said, "they took part in the… the…"

"Aye." Winnie nodded. "They made it their business to see to the MacGregors."

Elise's heart swelled when she learned of those few leaders who stood by their own. Of how the MacLeod chiefs improved the lives of their clansmen by ensuring their monies were shared amongst the people. The MacDonalds, too, had not partaken in the atrocities.

"Then," Winnie said, her voice softening, "we have the MacGregor."

Warmth emanated from her as she related how Cameron MacGregor, along with his young son, Marcus, defended their people. Only a few scant years ago Marcus picked up the gauntlet passed from father to son and returned to Brahan Seer with over a hundred ragged and defeated Highlanders. They were all he could save from the Sutherlund riots at Gruids.

"The Campbells were there," Winnie went on. "They gained noble rank—at the expense of the MacGregors. It's our wealth they stole. But we didn't lay down for it—and how they hate us for it." Her fingers convulsed on the embroidery needle. "They hate Cameron even more because he offered asylum to *any* Highlander. Two years ago, Marcus met them with a fist of iron when he attacked the Bannatyne Campbells."

"Dear God, why?"

"Katie MacGregor. If you had seen what they did to the lass—" Winnie forced the needle through the soft linen as if it was leather and gave a sudden cry.

A small pearl of blood splotched the beige cloth from beneath.

"Winnie!" Elise jumped to her feet.

Winnie snatched up the cloth and began sucking the blood from the linen. Elise grabbed the rag hanging over the hearth and wrapped it around Winnie's finger. Elise gripped it tightly, stanching the flow of blood. Winnie examined the cloth, then began sucking again.

"Shall I fetch some water?" Elise asked.

"Nay," Winnie replied, still sucking. "The saliva of the blood's owner is what takes blood from cloth." She looked at the cloth. The blood had disappeared. "This isn't the first MacGregor blood spilled because of Campbells, and it will not be the last."

A chill snaked through Elise. Would the next dead MacGregor

be amongst those who just set out for Campbell land?

* * * *

Elise bolted upright in bed, the echo of a scream giving way to the pounding in her ears. She looked wildly about the room but, instead of flames surrounding her as they had an instant before, only the hearth burned with soft, red embers. A faint light radiated from the coals. She gulped a deep breath upon recognizing the shadowed contours of the cottage she shared with Winnie. Which dream had awoken her this time? The one where she *hadn't* escaped her stateroom before it went up in flames, or the one where the flames of hell surrounded her?

Dear God, forgive me.

She choked back tears. He might forgive her, but Amelia and Steven wouldn't.

"Elise."

Elise jerked her attention to the far side of the room where Winnie slept.

"What is amiss?" the housekeeper asked in a sleep-laden voice. "You cried out—" Her gaze swung in the direction of the door. "What in God's name?"

The insistent knocking at the door penetrated Elise's brain and she realized the noise had yanked her from the dream.

Winnie threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. She draped a wrap about her shoulders and hurried to the door. "Who is it?" She yanked open the door. "Mary, girl," Winnie growled at the maid, "you had better—"

"The men have returned," the maid interrupted. "They're demanding supper."

"Mother of God," Winnie whispered. "Go along, child. I will follow in a minute." She shoved the door shut and scampered on tiptoe across the drafty floor to her bed.

"I'll come," Elise said as Winnie pulled off her shift and reached for the grey dress draped over her bed's foot board.

"No need." Winnie slipped the dress over her head.

Elise got to her feet. "No sense lying here while you work."

She quickly dressed, then grabbed the *plaide* from the foot of her bed and draped it over her shoulders as she followed Winnie out the door.

Minutes later, Elise slowed two paces into the kitchen, startled by the grim silence that pressed in about the room. Winnie hastened to the counter where Mary and another girl were placing mutton and chicken on platters. Elise shook off the morose feeling and tossed the

plaide she wore onto the counter, then hurried forward to join in the preparations.

"Nay, Wilma," Winnie admonished. "Leave the plate of mutton. You and Mary fetch wine from the cellar. The men will sleep better with a little help."

The girls hurried off. Cold chicken, bread, and peas were quickly placed on platters. Elise took the platter Winnie placed in her hands and headed for the great hall.

The camaraderie which generally characterized gatherings in the eating hall was absent. When Elise set the peas on the table, her heart stirred at sight of the men's exhausted faces. She cast a furtive glance at Marcus. The hard set of his mouth and hollow eyes startled her. What had happened to the carefree devil who held her in his arms only a few days ago? She returned to the kitchen.

"Take those." Winnie pointed to the bottles of wine sitting on the table, then turned back to the bread she had unwrapped from its cloth cover.

Elise hesitated. Four uneventful months at Brahan Seer had dulled her senses. Why hadn't she realized Cameron's son would be with his men tonight? A tremor rocked her belly. Neither had she considered that he could have read the wanted notice for Elisabeth Kingston while in London. He was far more sophisticated than Michael and, surely, far less trusting. Given time, would Marcus MacGregor recognize Elise as the nickname for Elisabeth?

"Elise."

She snapped from her thoughts and saw Winnie staring expectantly at her. Elise grabbed the bottles of wine on the table and reentered the hall. Marcus's plate was untouched. She set the wine on the table. His gaze met and held hers for an instant before he shoved back his chair and rose.

She remained rooted to the spot as he strode to the stairwell. At the stairs, he paused and looked back at her, eyes dark with need. He turned suddenly and headed up the stairs. Her breath caught at sight of his shirt, taut across his shoulders, and her gaze dropped to his calves in the instant before he disappeared from view. Elise broke the stare and realized her pulse had jumped to a gallop. Good Lord, was the greater danger Marcus connecting her to the Elisabeth Kingston wanted for murder, or her reaction to him? Until now, she hadn't worried how long Price persisted in searching for her. She had been sure she could wait him out. Now, could she afford to wait—could she afford to remain even another night near Marcus MacGregor?

* * * *

Marcus awoke, his body hard with arousal. He shifted his thoughts from Elise to the Campbells, but the memory of her face the night before persisted. Her eyes changed with her mood. Would those eyes darken with passion when she lay beneath him? He stirred restlessly. How might she cry out as he brought her to her pleasure? He would find out—and soon.

Ten minutes later, Marcus entered the kitchen to find the women busy with preparations for the meals. "Good morning, Winnie." He seated himself across the table from her.

She reached for a sprig of herbs from one of the piles before her and began grinding it in a mortar bowl. "Morning."

He glanced at the rear door.

"No sense watching the door. She isna' here."

He leaned forward. "You are a witch, Winnie, my love. Where is she?"

"Michael's. She set out early this morning."

"Why?"

"He broke his leg. She makes sure he is tended to."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed." Winnie reached for another sprig of herbs.

Marcus rose and kissed her cheek. "Making trouble while I've been gone, I wager?"

She looked up. "No more than usual."

"So I thought," he said, and left the kitchen.

* * * *

Marcus looked from his father to the warrior entering the great hall. The man strode past the men gathered for the evening meal and stopped at the table opposite him.

"Lady Ross to see you, laird," he said.

"And you back but a day from fighting with Campbells," Cameron said.

Marcus sighed. "I suppose she knows I'm here."

The guard looked uncomfortable.

"You can escape out the back," his father suggested, but the door opened again and Lady Margaret Ross entered dressed in a tightly fitting riding habit that said she'd been in the saddle the better part of the day. "I told ye not to dally with noblewomen," Cameron added under his breath, and stood as she approached. "Margaret, lass, how are you?" He clasped her hands in his.

"Your Grace." She dipped into a deep curtsy.

He shot Marcus a dry look while her head was bowed. "Enough, lassie." He pulled the petite woman to her feet. "We are not in Edinburgh." He released her hands. "You will forgive me, if I dinna'

stay. I have a mare that bears attending." He winked. "You won't miss me, I feel sure."

"It is always good to see you, Your Grace."

"It is good to see you, as well."

"You haven't had your supper, Cameron," Marcus remarked.

"Aye, well, I cannot leave Coreen alone too long. She is due to foal any time."

"Craig can watch after her."

Cameron snorted. "The boy doesna' know a gelding from a stallion."

"The next time you geld a stallion, have him watch. He'll remember after that."

His father cast a sheepish look at Margaret. "Well, I do not think—"

"Never mind," Marcus cut in. "As you say, you have a mare to attend to."

"I do," he agreed, and made a hasty exit.

Lady Ross looked to Marcus. "Lord Ashlund." She started to curtsy again.

"None of that, Margaret," he said.

She paused and studied him from beneath her lashes then, with an incline of her head, straightened. She gave him an inquiring look and he stood.

"Gille," he addressed the man seated to his right, "give your seat up to the lady."

The man stood and bowed.

Lady Ross angled her head in thanks, then sat. "You are looking well," she said. "Did you enjoy London?"

Once again, the postern door opened and Marcus paused in sitting to look see who entered. Recognizing the newcomer as another of his men, he seated himself.

"Lord Ashlund," came Margaret's insistent voice.

"My visit went well." He forced his attention to her.

"I'm sorry I could not accompany you as you wanted."

"It was you who requested an escort, Margaret, not I who requested your presence."

"A shame my plans changed," she went on. "Unfortunately, I now must go to London." She smiled. "I would be glad of your company."

He gave a mirthless laugh. "London twice a year is quite enough. I have no wish to make it three."

She laid a hand on his arm. "Not long ago you would have done this for me."

"Made a special trip to London? You're confusing me with

another of your admirers."

The women began serving the food and he glanced at the clock over the mantle. The evening grew late. "Did you come alone?" he demanded.

"I did."

Marcus frowned. "Very foolish."

The postern door creaked open again. Daniel stepped in. He looked in Marcus's direction. Amusement flicked across his face before he turned and exited.

"Are you expecting someone?" Margaret asked.

A maid placed a platter of mutton on his side of the table and he reached for it. "I will have one of my men escort you home." He dished a helping of meat onto his plate.

"It is so late, I thought perhaps…"

Marcus paused and looked at her. "You knew you would arrive after dark. Why do it?"

She stiffened. "Sheathe your conceit, Marcus. You were not the only person I visited today." She pursed her lips. "If my staying is too much of an inconvenience…"

He glanced again at the clock. Elise wouldn't journey home in the dark. He sat the platter of meat on the table. If she did, he would clip her lovely wings.

* * * *

When Elise didn't return the following afternoon, Marcus went in search of his father and found him in the stables keeping watch on Coreen.

"It isn't unusual for her to be gone a day or two when she goes to Michael's," Cameron said. "She likes to make sure he is well-cared-for."

"What the blazes does that mean?" Marcus demanded.

His father stopped mid-stroke as he ran his hand across the mare's distended belly. "Hell, lad, the man is my age. What would he want with a lass Elise's age?"

"Age has not stopped you of late."

Cameron flushed. "A man cannot resist the charms of a woman forever, you know."

"That's exactly what I am afraid of," Marcus muttered.

"Although," Cameron said, his tone thoughtful, "I didna' see young Erin return with you. Did he go directly to Michael's? He has not seen his father in months."

"Yes, by God. How long did you say she usually stays with Michael?"

The mare nickered and Cameron began stroking her again. "She does, *on occasion*, stay a couple days, but, certainly, never longer."

"And it has been two days."

"It has," Cameron said with such emphasis that Marcus looked at him.

"I'll ride out and make sure she is safe."

"A fine idea. We would not want anything to happen, would we?"

Marcus gave his father a recriminating look, then snapped out an order for his stallion to be saddled.

Marcus stopped in front of Michael's cottage, dismounted, and tossed the reins over the post to the right of the porch. He entered the cottage without knocking.

"Back for more, lass?" came Michael's voice from behind the curtain that enclosed the corner bed.

"More of what?" Marcus demanded.

Michael drew back the curtain with a flourish. He met Marcus's gaze and grinned. "Marcus, this is a surprise."

"I imagine so," he said as Michael rose and hobbled toward him.

The old man halted. "Is something wrong?"

"Nay. Where is Elise? She's been gone some time and Cameron is concerned."

"Concerned?" Michael looked puzzled. "I cannot imagine why —" He stopped, his eyes narrowing shrewdly. "Are you sure 'tis not you who is worried?"

Marcus relaxed. "Where is she?"

"Marcus, you've come all this way, and I haven't seen you in an age. Surely, you can spare a civil word? Sit down." He motioned toward the table sitting before the hearth. "Have a drink. Dinna' fash over Elise. She'll return soon."

"Return?" Marcus started. "Where is she?"

Michael sighed and gave him a disgusted look. "Out in the barn with Erin."

Marcus left the cottage, the words *with Erin* ringing in his head as he strode across the meadow to the barn.

"I want to thank you for all you've done for my father." Erin's voice filtered from the barn as Marcus neared.

"It's nothing," Elise replied.

Marcus paused at the open door. The sound of milk squirting into a pail was followed by a low moo from the heifer.

"Nay," Erin went on, "you lifted his spirits. It's difficult, him out here alone."

"Why hasn't he moved into the village?"

"This land has been worked by our family for generations. He refuses to give it up."

"I can understand—" She cried out in unison with the clang of a hoof against metal.

Marcus shot forward but halted inside the door at seeing Elise on her backside in a puddle of spilt milk, the pail on its side beside her. Erin leaned with his arms over the cow's back, staring down at her.

"Oh, dear." She looked up at Erin. "I haven't quite got the hang of it."

The young warrior came around the cow and squatted beside Elise. "Are you all right?" His voice betrayed the mirth he clearly felt.

"Fine," she replied wryly and extended a hand. "If you please?"

He stood, pulling her to her feet. She twisted in an effort to examine the back of her skirt.

"You have milk in your hair. How did you manage that?"

Elise gave him a dry look and shook out her skirt. "Perhaps I need a dip in the loch."

"Rather cold."

"True, but it would be better than this milk. It's getting late and I doubt I'll return to Brahan Seer tonight."

"Aye," Marcus said. "You will return to Brahan Seer tonight."

Her head snapped in his direction as Erin whirled. "Marcus, what is amiss?"

Marcus looked at Elise. "I am here to take Elise home."

"Take her home?" Erin echoed.

"Aye. It's late, and Cameron was growing concerned." Marcus wondered at his rapidly increasing ability to lie with such ease.

"Of course." Erin faced Elise and bowed. "Thank you for coming. I know my father was pleased to see you."

He stepped back, and Elise turned a calculating eye on Marcus. His body tensed under her scrutiny.

"I am not going anywhere."

"Nay?" he asked, quelling the tightening of his groin at the cool note of confidence.

"My visit here is not finished."

"Nay?" he repeated.

She glanced at the pail laying near her feet and Marcus prepared for a quick retreat.

"No," she answered, and he relaxed upon seeing her turn her attention, albeit reluctantly, from the pail. "It's late and I have no horse," she said. "The trip home on foot after dark is dangerous."

"Aye," Marcus agreed.

Her brow knit in confusion, then her eyes widened. "I will not

make another trip with you on your mount."

The statement was made with such force that Marcus nearly laughed.

"I will lend you a mare," Erin offered.

Marcus regarded her and lifted a brow in question.

"I promised Michael dinner."

"Elise," Erin put in, "my father will understand."

She kept her gaze on Marcus. "You may leave. I will find my way home."

His heart beat wildly at the open defiance expressed with such aplomb. He stepped forward and Erin moved to intervene.

"Laird." The young man's voice hit like ice water and Marcus looked at him. "She doesn't know our ways," Erin said.

Marcus relaxed and shifted his gaze to her. "If it pleases her to stay, we shall. But only for dinner."

She gave a snort, then strode past them and out the door.

As the evening wore on, Marcus watched Elise entice them into becoming willing participants in the preparation of the meal.

"You three will not sit idle while I do all the work," she said.

"Lass," Michael protested, "what would poor men such as ourselves know of preparing food?"

"Enough, I'm sure." She thrust the handle of a knife into his hand.

An instant later, she'd replaced the copy of the *Sunday Times* sitting on the table beside him with an onion. Michael looked at her as if she were mad but, in the end, peeled and sliced the onion, his lip twitching with barely suppressed amusement.

"Erin." Elise placed a bowl of flour, sugar, and cream of tartar in his hands. "You stir the biscuits. Marcus," she said, surprising him, "see to the grouse on the fire."

Marcus obeyed, but turned a moment later when she cried, "Erin!" and saw Erin had spilled flour from the bowl onto the table.

Erin looked to his father.

"Do not look at me, lad. 'Tis not my fault you can't stir flour without dumping it all over yourself."

Elise grasped Erin's hand, trying to show him how to gentle his touch. Marcus jolted at seeing her slender fingers covering the young man's large hand. *Damn it, surely the boy posed no threat?* Marcus knew he'd lost his mind. Bloody hell, he was jealous.

"Ohh," she said in frustration as more flour went over the side of the bowl.

Marcus laughed at the sheepish look on Erin's face. She snatched up the bowl and Michael joined in when she muttered

incoherently and strode to the stove to finish the biscuits.

"So, tell me, Marcus," Michael said through his laughter. "How was London?"

"The same as always."

"And Kiernan?"

At the mention of his son's name, Marcus recalled his surprise at how much the boy had grown in the last year. At only eighteen, he towered over most Englishmen. Referred to as the dark giant, he deserved the nickname. Still, Marcus never ceased to marvel at the fact that one noticed his mother's raven hair and blue eyes when he entered a room. Unbidden, his father's words echoed in Marcus's mind, *"Do you not wonder if the sacrifice is worth your son?"*

"Is it worth it?" he said under his breath.

"What's that you say?" Michael asked.

Marcus focused on him. "The lad is doing as well as can be expected, considering."

"Considering?" Elise asked.

"Aye," he said, glad his father wasn't present to hear his response. "Considering he lives among the Sassenach."

At meal's end, Marcus insisted they go. Elise's expression darkened and she looked as if she might protest, but he caught her glance in the direction of father and son and relaxed when he saw she had chosen discretion over pride. Anticipation surged through him, despite the knowledge she considered him the lesser of the evils.

They stood at the door. Elise rose on tiptoes and planted a kiss on Michael's cheek. "Stay off your wounded leg."

"Thank you. You're a good lass." He gave her a bear hug.

"No toying with me."

The impish wink she gave Michael made Marcus regret ending the evening. She would be more reserved with her charms once they were alone. She went outside where Erin waited with their horses.

Marcus clasped Michael's hands.

"Do not wait so long to come back," Michael said.

Marcus started to release his hand, but Michael's grip tightened. "Be careful." He glanced in Elise's direction. "The dark has been known to bite."

Chapter Four

To be bitten in the dark.

Marcus glanced at Elise. Moonlight filtered in dim rays through the trees, making it impossible to distinguish her features atop the mare. He slid his gaze over her figure. It was a shame Erin had a mare she could ride.

"Marcus," she broke into his thoughts.

He checked the surge of eagerness that leapt to life. "Aye?"

"Why does your son live in England?"

"Politics, love."

"Ah," she replied. "I see."

He was sure she didn't but was pleased nonetheless.

"Having your son living amongst a people so different from your own can't be easy."

"Nay?" They moved out of the trees into pale moonlight and he discerned an indulgent smile on her face.

"I'm not ignorant of the differences between the Highland life and that of London."

"You have been to London?" he asked.

"No, but where I'm from can't be much different."

"Where might that be, lass?"

"Boston."

"Do you miss it?" he asked.

"No."

He wondered at the quick answer, then his gaze caught on her mouth. What would it be like to kiss those lips? Moonlight glistened on the dark hair that cascaded down her cloaked shoulders. She straightened in the saddle, sharpening the curve of her breasts. He imagined his hand sliding over them and downward to the soft curls nestled below. Marcus shifted in the saddle to accommodate his growing arousal. Elise shook her head and ran a hand through her hair. What would she do if he took her now? Just when he'd convinced himself she wouldn't resist, his mind snapped to attention at hearing an unexpected noise.

"Do you—" she began.

"Hush," Marcus commanded in a whisper.

He reined in alongside her. Grabbing her mare's bridle, he pulled both horses to a stop. He dismounted, then hauled her down from the saddle and drew her close to whisper in her ear, "There is a hill just ahead. I'm going for a look. Do not move." He shoved the reins into her hand and slinked into the darkness.

Near the top of the hill, Marcus crouched, then finally went to his knees, crawling the last few feet to the crest. Between the hill

where he crouched and the opposite hill, three men on horses picked their way across the rocky ground. Their colors were indistinguishable, but he knew they were Campbells.

When he had demanded Shamus's killer be turned over to him, John Campbell had complied *after* Marcus and his men threatened to take John in his kinsmen's place. The fact the man was turned over to Peter McKinlay of the Glasgow police for a proper trial made no difference. John Campbell had been furious.

The men disappeared into the trees, and Marcus hesitated. The keep was another ten minutes' ride. Could he send Elise on alone? He remembered Katie MacGregor and cursed. He couldn't gamble with Elise's safety.

Marcus quietly made his way back down the hill and, minutes later, distinguished her form in the darkness. "Elise," he called in a whisper.

Her head jerked in his direction, but she didn't cry out. After another instant, he reached her side. He grasped her shoulders and pulled her close, whispering, "We must ride—and fast." She started. "All will be well." He squeezed her shoulders. "You ride with me. Can you stay in the saddle?"

She nodded.

"Good lass." He reached for the reins

She grabbed his arm. "What's happened?"

He hesitated. "Campbells."

She glanced at the hill. "So close to Brahan Seer?"

"Aye."

Marcus vaulted into his stallion's saddle, then extended a hand toward her. Elise yanked her skirts thigh high, grabbed his hand, and jumped nimbly up behind him as he pulled. She wrapped her arms around his midsection. The soft contours of her breasts pressed into his back. He gritted his teeth and nudged the stallion into a quiet walk, keeping the mare close until they were well out of earshot of the small camp. Then he urged the stallion into a gallop.

The men on the castle walls sprang to life at their approach half an hour later. Marcus brought their horses to a skidding halt before the gate. "Open!" he shouted. "'Tis me, Marcus."

The gate creaked open and he drove the horses through before the doors had swung wide. He halted amongst the gathering warriors and brought his leg over the horse's head, sliding from the saddle.

"Marshall," he called to the nearest man as he pulled Elise from the saddle, "find Daniel and have him gather twenty men. We ride in ten minutes. Where is my father?"

"I dinna' know," Marshall answered. "Mayhap the great hall?"

Marcus started off, then stopped and whirled to see Elise standing where he left her. "Go to your cottage," he ordered then, cursing the powers that be, set out after his father.

* * * *

Elise glanced at Michael, who rode alongside her. His gaze remained directly ahead. The rigid set of his mouth indicated he was still angry with her for coming alone to his cottage. Guilt unsettled her. His anger was born out of concern, and he was more right than she cared to admit. To make matters worse, the trip had been a waste. He hadn't received a recent copy of the *Sunday Times*.

Birds abruptly took flight in the trees up ahead. She gave a small cry. Michael shot her a look that said, *Not so sure there aren't any Campbells on MacGregor land, are you?*

Heat warmed her cheeks and she looked straight ahead. The Campbells had eluded Marcus that night three weeks ago. No further trace of them or their kinsmen had been found since, but Marcus was on a mission to discover who had trespassed onto his land. As a result, she wouldn't be able to ride more than an hour without encountering one of his men.

Damn him. If not for his watchful eye, she would be on a ship to America. The night he fetched her from Michael's, she had decided not to return to Brahan Seer but to continue to Glasgow and chance the first ship away from Scotland. The wanted notice had been in the *Sunday Times* dated three weeks prior, but Price could have given up since then.

She took a shaky breath and closed her eyes. Price stared back at her from behind her father's mahogany desk at Landen Shipping. MacGregor men wouldn't crawl the land like mice much longer. Soon she would return for the man who had put her mother in an early grave, then quietly took part in her daughter's murder. Her heart constricted. Steven was a casualty of *her* making—a casualty she knew Price Ardsley relished. Elise forced back tears.

Beware, stepfather. I will return.

"Will you come to the great hall?" Elise asked Michael when they passed through the castle gates.

"Aye," he replied shortly.

"Michael," she began, but he pulled his horse to a halt beside her and dismounted.

He came around to her and helped her from the saddle. "Go on." She hesitated, and his eyes softened. "I'll be along after I have seen to the animals."

She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "You're a good man, Michael MacGregor."

He shook his head, but she could see that he was pleased. He limped off leading the horses, and Elise headed for the great hall. At the postern door, she entered and saw Marcus standing near the hearth. He broke off his conversation with the two men who stood with him and glanced over his shoulder. The drawn look on his face snapped into a dark scowl. He started forward. Elise faltered when she saw he meant to intercept her. His companions disappeared up the nearest staircase and a hum of apprehension began deep in her stomach.

Marcus rounded the table and reached the midway point when she blurted, "Good afternoon, Marcus. How are you?"

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"I—" She fell back an unsteady step when it seemed he would ram into her. He halted three feet from her. "I have just returned from visiting Michael."

"So I was told," he replied curtly. "Winnie's warning did nothing to deter you?"

"Winnie's warnin—" Elise recalled her encounter with Winnie that morning. Good Lord, Winnie had told him she saw her leave.

Marcus's eyes narrowed. "Aye, you remember. Fortunately for you, I only just discovered your absence. Unmanageable wench," he added in a dark voice.

"You have your answers," she shot back. "Why bother asking?"

"Because I couldn't believe you were traipsing about the countryside."

"I was not *traipsing* about the country. Not that it's your business."

"It is my business—and I will see to it you no' do it again."

She ignored the warning bell the definite hardening of his brogue set off inside her head. and said, "You're insane if you think I'll be ordered about."

"Ye will do as you're told," he said in a quiet voice that was perversely more unsettling than a shout.

"I come and go as I please, just as everyone else at Brahan Seer."

A keen light shone in his eyes. "If you will note, the women are staying close to home." His expression hardened. "At the express command of their men."

Elise gasped, then glanced past him, gauging the distance between him and the freedom the kitchen offered. He stepped closer and her temper flared. She raised her hands to shield herself from his advance and her palms met the unexpected warmth of his chest. She

gaped at her fingers splayed across tanned skin where his shirt lay open, and her senses reeled at the raw power in the heavy rise and fall of his chest.

"Lord," she whispered, and yanked her hands away.

The vague realization that strong fingers had gripped her wrists was overshadowed by the jolt she felt when Marcus forced her hands back to his chest. Her mind screamed to break free, but the sight of her palms gliding over his dark skin—the need to touch every contour, to know intimately his powerful body—held her rooted to the spot. She tore her gaze from his chest and looked into his eyes. The fire blazing there drew her—commanded her—and she leaned into him.

"There ye are, lad. I was just look—"

Elise twisted as Cameron reached the bottom of the nearest staircase. He lifted a bushy brow. She looked back at Marcus. His hold loosened and she snatched her hands away. She retreated, stumbling over her own feet. Marcus reached for her, but she dodged his hand with another unsure step backward.

"I-I must go," she stammered, and fled the room.

"*Elise*—bloody hell!"

Marcus's voice echoed off the stone walls as she shoved through the postern door.

Elise avoided Marcus that night. Yet his memory persisted. Alone in bed, her cheeks burned with the recollection of how he had forced her hands against him in a rough caress. Though only a moment passed between them, her senses had taken in every contour as her fingers glided along the unyielding muscle. The hint of brandy on his breath, the hammering of his beating heart, his hard body—with a flourish, she threw back the covers. Cold air crept over her. Yet it wasn't the cold that made her shiver, but the vision of Marcus's hands touching her as she had touched him. Oh, treacherous body! To be undone by desire.

A desire beyond that which drew you to the man you shot, her mind whispered.

Elise examined her hands in the moonlight that spilled across the bed from the window above her head. It hadn't occurred to her she would touch another man as she had Robert. A porcelain doll, Robert had called her, to be admired but not touched. The fact he had suffered her in his bed only long enough to get her with child had proven even her beauty had been lacking. Yet the memory of Robert's scorn didn't stop the leap of her heart at the thought of Marcus.

Time grew short—shorter than she had realized. Dare she wait another week or even a day before leaving Scotland?

* * * *

Marcus stood on the battlement speaking with Daniel when he spied Elise emerging from the stables astride a horse.

"By God," he cursed.

"What is it?" Daniel looked in the direction Marcus stared.

"Stop her!" Marcus shouted down to the guards, then hurried down the stairs.

Her gaze met his as he leapt from the battlement steps into the courtyard. "Out of my way," she ordered.

"Woman, only yesterday you fled from me as if I were an ogre. Now you dispense imperious orders as though you are a queen. Where are you going?"

"To find Tavis and box his ears. Then I'll drag him and his sister back."

Marcus raised a brow. "Tired of chasing the little fools all over God's green earth? A pity they won't listen to good advice. Come down from there." He reached to pull her from the mare's back.

She slapped his hand. "They purposely sneaked out."

"Disobedient brats," he said.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Never mind," he said.

"Never mind?" she choked. "If I hadn't heard it myself, I wouldn't have believed it." She jerked on the reins. "Out of my wa—" Elise shrieked when he yanked her from the saddle.

Marcus brought her face level with his. "Yesterday, you left against my command. Will you attempt to disobey me again today?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I planned to enlist Brady's help in finding the children."

"And if he's not available?"

"He's the stable master. He is always in the stables."

"Aye," Marcus said. "But if he isn't, you will use good sense and return to the keep?" He added before she could argue, "I'll fetch the children."

Her eyes lit. "I'll wait while you get a horse."

He released her, then pried the reins from her fingers and mounted. "I will go."

"But—"

"Elise," he growled, "are you saying I cannot deal with two errant children?"

"No-no, of course not. It's just that Bonnie is so little, and Tavis —" Her eyes blazed. "The boy is going to get them both killed."

"Why does he take his sister with him?" Marcus asked.

"He doesn't. She's a clever child. She watches, then follows."

"Bloody hell," he said under his breath. "She is but seven."

Elise laid a hand atop Marcus's hand, which rested on his thigh. "Why does Tavis persist in going out like this? I thought you dealt with his father's murderer."

"Revenge is never satisfied," Marcus replied.

Her fingers moved against his and he looked at her hand. His gaze caught on the long, thin scar on the outside edge of her palm. He had noticed it before, had meant to ask her—She snatched her hand back.

Marcus looked down at her and smiled softly. "It is all right, love. I will bring them safely home." He brushed a finger across her cheek.

She looked startled and a blush crept up her cheeks.

Marcus urged his horse forward, satisfied.

* * * *

Two hours later, Elise looked up from her seat in the kitchen to see Marcus enter with Bonnie on his shoulders. A general round of praise went up from the women. He gave a gallant bow, very obviously pretending to forget Bonnie, then grabbed her at the last moment and shoved her back into place on his shoulders.

Warmth rippled through Elise at sight of him pausing to pluck slices of apples from a bowl on the counter. She silently cursed her schoolgirl giddiness. Marcus popped a slice into his mouth, then passed one to Bonnie. Elise's thudding heart kicked up a notch when he looked in her direction. He started toward her and she hastily returned her attention to the potatoes she was peeling. He pulled Bonnie from his shoulders and lowered himself into the chair beside Elise. Bonnie settled on his lap and leaned back in the crook of his arm. Absorbed in her apple, she munched contentedly.

"I think we need not worry any longer about Bonnie running after Tavis," Marcus said.

Elise looked to find a lock of hair had fallen across his forehead, making him look very much like a large child himself. She resisted the urge to smooth the lock back into place.
Focusing instead on her potatoes, she said, "Why is that?"

"Because he won't be taking any more trips."

"How can you be sure?"

"I told him not to."

Elise sighed. The boy would probably obey without even a whimper. She hazarded a glance at Marcus. He was grinning.

Her heart unexpectedly constricted. How would she live without seeing that smile every day?

* * * *

When Elise entered the kitchen the following afternoon, she frowned at finding the room empty. Winnie napped in the early afternoon and several of the younger women tended to their families' needs, but Jinny was usually present, starting preparations for the evening meal.

Jinny's voice abruptly sounded from the eating hall. "Please, milaird, let me go."

"Come now," a male voice boomed, "'tis only a friendly gesture."

A round of riotous laughter followed this statement.

"Nay, laird," Jinny pleaded, "I dinna' want you to be friendly."

"You haven't given me a chance," the male voice began as Elise retrieved a large cast-iron pan from the ten plate stove located against the wall near the hearth. She crept toward the door leading to the great hall and heard, "I can be verra friendly, given the proper incentive."

From the kitchen door, she saw Jinny, held on a man's lap, twist in an effort to avoid his kiss.

Elise stepped through the doorway. "Enough!"

The command rang through the stone chamber, quieting the group.

The brute blinked. "Who might you be?"

"Let her go," she ordered.

He shared an amused look with his comrades, then lifted Jinny from his lap and rose.

"Go along, Jinny," Elise said.

The girl whirled and fled out the postern door. The brute strode to where Elise stood.

He clasped his arms over his large chest and cocked his head to the side. "Now what?"

"You released her. Satisfy yourself you've escaped intact."

"I need a replacement." He reached for her.

In one long movement, Elise swung the pan, bringing the cast iron pot across his shoulder. Metal met muscle with a loud crack, and the blow sent the sizeable man tumbling to the floor. He lay sprawled on the floor, blinking up at her.

Elise stared down at him. "Try such nonsense again, and the next one will be across that thick Scots head of yours."

Howls of laughter filled the room from the brute's comrades. He pushed to his feet. "Seems you need a lesson, lassie."

"Nay, Declan," came Marcus's voice behind her.

Elise whirled. Marcus caught the hand holding the pan. She

glimpsed Jinny near the kitchen door.

"You won't be needing this anymore." Marcus gently worked the pan free of her grasp.

She looked down at the pan and released it.

Declan grabbed for her, but Marcus pulled her to his side. "No touching the lass."

"But you saw what she did. I willna' hurt her." He gave her an appraising look. "Not really."

Elise shot him a recriminating look.

"You brought this on yourself," Marcus said.

"You aren't taking her side?"

"I am."

"Nay," he said in clear disbelief.

"Aye."

He gave Marcus a dubious look, then grumbled as he retreated to his seat, "Probably not worth the trouble, anyway."

Marcus placed the pan on the counter, then started for the great hall.

"Marcus," Elise said as he brushed past her.

He stopped and turned.

"Keep him away from Jinny."

* * * *

Marcus reached for the pitcher of ale sitting on the table before him and Declan and refilled their glasses. "How many cattle were stolen?" Marcus set the pitcher back on the table. The man to his right snatched up the pitcher and passed it down the table to the men gathered for dinner.

"Thirty or forty head," Declan replied.

"Within two months?" Marcus gave a low whistle. "My guess is Campbells."

"Aye," Declan agreed. "But I havena' been able to catch the bastards in the act."

"We've had Campbells on our land of late."

"The bastards," Declan said with feeling. He picked up a piece of bread from one of the platters sitting before him and stuffed a piece into his mouth. "They get around, eh?" His eyes gleamed. "If it's a fight they're wanting, I'll oblige."

"That would be nothing to scoff at," Marcus said.

Declan's own men, plus extended relatives, rallied a force of six hundred men. Add the MacGregor forces, which numbered nearly twelve hundred, and they commanded a small army.

"I can't blame you for wanting to put an end to the foolishness,"

Marcus said, "but a little rustling isn't worth a war." Declan started to reply, but Marcus cut him off. "War it would be, Declan. There isn't a clan in the district who would pass up the chance to even the score against the Campbells."

"And the Campbells hold their own grudges," Declan put in. "They haven't forgiven you for your assault on Assipattle two years ago."

Marcus's jaw tightened. They had better not forget. He hadn't forgotten Katie MacGregor. "The next time they attack a MacGregor woman, I will raze every Campbell keep from the border to Assipattle."

Chapter Five

A branch snapped with a loud crack. Elise jerked her gaze onto her companion Allister, then twisted in the saddle and peered over her shoulder. A blur of green and blue *plaide* shot from the trees at the top of the hill. She gasped.

Campbells.

Elise faced Allister. The young man stared back at the Campbells, eyes narrow with fury. Dear God, she hadn't believed them to be a genuine threat, but in an effort to buy time when she didn't return to Brahan Seer, she had asked Allister to accompany her to Michael's. If anything happened to him—

He yanked the dirk from the leather scabbard strapped to his horse and snapped his eyes onto her. "Ride."

She kicked violently into the mare's belly. The mare lunged forward alongside Allister's gelding. The sound of pursuing hoof beats bore down upon them. She hugged the horse's neck, urging the mare into a harder gallop down the mountainside.

The heaving horses closed in from behind. Elise's heart thudded in unison with the pounding of her mount's hooves. Tears stung her eyes as she clung to the horse, the jerky rise and fall of the animal's neck jolting her body with each swift stride. Allister's horse nosed ahead and Elise knew the young man was restraining him in order to keep pace with her.

From the corner of her right eye, she glimpsed the nose of a horse gaining—then a flash of metal and a man's cry as Allister's dirk found its mark. The other men shouted and her heart leapt into her throat. She cracked the reins over the rump of the horse, then suddenly pitched forward. She tumbled over the horse's head as the mare hit the ground nose first. Allister shouted her name.

The mare somersaulted over herself, and Elise saw the hooves bearing down on her as she and the mare plummeted downhill. The wind gushed from her lungs, then a splitting pain shot through her head when she thudded to the ground, grinding her cheek into the hard, rocky soil. The blurry figure of the horse landed a few feet away, rolled, then jumped up, and disappeared.

A shot sounded.

"Bloody animal got away," a man muttered as horses drew up alongside her.

Booted feet appeared at her side.

"She's broken her neck," another said.

"What of the boy?" another asked.

Fingers gingerly probed her forehead, then temples.

"Dead."

"She's hit the front of her head," said a deeper voice—not Marcus's voice, but who—Sudden pain registered through the fog as she was rolled to her side. She groaned.

"She's not dead," the deep voice said.

Fingers ran along her spine.

"She hasna' broken her back. She'll live."

Arms slid beneath her, then lifted her from the ground and pressed her against a warm body. She opened her eyes, but her blurry vision made out only the wall of flesh her face was shoved against.

"Leave her," said the other. "If we bring her back damaged, it'll be our heads."

"Toss the saddle over the mountain." The speaker shifted her in his arms. Pain splintered through her back "Round up the gelding," the man said, "and throw Greig's body over his back. Damn the MacGregor dog who killed him. If he wasn't already dead, I would kill him myself."

Shock reverberated through Elise. Young Allister was dead?

* * * *

As Marcus approached the village stables, he glimpsed movement through the open door. He yanked aside his steward Harris as a rider burst from the stables. The youth riding the horse seemed not to notice he had forced them from his path and galloped toward the village.

"Youth," Marcus muttered, and entered the stables. "I want Gaelan's, Logan's, Sloan's, and Neal's places finished by summer's end." He strode along the line of stalls.

Harris made notations in his notebook. "We can have them patched by month's end."

"Patch Sloan's," Marcus said. "The others, replace."

"That'll take 'til Fall, and we will need materials."

"Order what you need from Edinburgh. In the meantime, get started on the minor repairs for the other cottages. I want you back in Ashlund by month's end. I don't plan on returning for"—he thought of Elise in his bed, her hands on him—"for some time." Marcus halted at the stall that housed the horse he wanted to examine. "Gerald," he murmured to the gelding, who stood, head hanging over the stall door. Marcus rubbed Gerald's nose while he unlatched the door and stepped inside. "Getting along in years, are you, lad? Harris," Marcus called.

Harris entered the stall.

"What do you think?" Marcus ran a hand down the horse's leg.

"He stumbled last week."

Harris squatted and looked closely at Gerald's knee. "A might knobby." Harris stood and walked around the horse, feeling belly and rump as he went. "His coat is dull and"—the steward came around to the horse's head again—"his head is hanging low."

"Aye," Marcus agreed. "We'll need two more plow horses then. Alen could last another season, but we will use him for delivery. Don't order from MacFie. I have another seller in mind. Belgian draft horses."

"Aye," Harris replied.

Marcus went around the rump of the horse. "Go yourself. There's a Russian Trotter I want you to look at. You can order the supplies while in Edinburgh."

"What are ye saying?" A shout from outside the stall intruded upon their conversation.

Marcus recognized the stable master's voice.

"Where did they go?" Brady demanded.

"Mary didna' g-go with Elise," Craig, the stable boy, stammered.

Marcus stilled.

"Bloody fool," Brady shot back. "You didn't wonder why she wanted the mare?"

Marcus cursed and started for the door.

"W-why should I wonder?" the boy stuttered. "You let Mary use your horse before. How could I know you changed your mind?"

"Christ," Brady's voice was hoarse. "MacGregor will whip us both."

Marcus lunged from the stall and Craig went pale. Brady glanced over his shoulder and his eyes widened.

Marcus strode toward them. "Hold," he commanded when it looked as if they would bolt.

"I had no notion—" Brady began, but Marcus raised a hand.

He grabbed Craig by the collar, nearly lifting him from the ground. "What happened?"

"Th-they came a-a-and g-go—"

"Pull yourself together," Marcus snapped.

Craig swallowed. "M-Mary and Elise came and s-saddled Brady's mare. I didn't know they were not supposed t-to take her."

"Nay?" He gave the boy a hard shake. "How long ago did she leave?"

Craig hesitated, and Marcus said, "It is nearly three now. How long?"

"This morning. Mayhap eight."

"You helped them saddle the mare?" Marcus snapped.

"No! I heard them saddle the horse." He hesitated.

Marcus's lips tightened. "Sleeping?"

Craig dropped his gaze.

"What did they say?" Marcus demanded.

"Elise was g-going to Michael's."

Marcus shoved Craig from him. "Saddle Alexis."

"That devil?" Harris blurted.

"Alexis," Marcus repeated. "I will take even the devil's help."

Ten minutes later, Marcus galloped out of the stables. He left the path as soon as he found a reasonable place to drive the stallion down the steep hills, cutting off more than half the time Elise would have taken to reach Michael's. The resolve he had made to whip her to within an inch of her life died when he reached the cottage to discover she hadn't been there.

"I'll come with ye to find her," Michael said. He turned and started toward the corner containing his bed.

Marcus glanced at Michael's leg. The splint was gone. "There's no time to saddle your horse."

"There is," the older man said, his voice firm. "It will take but three minutes."

Marcus started to argue, but Michael strode the last two paces to his bed, saying, "We can waste time arguing if you like, but I'm going." He snatched up the coat lying on the chest at the foot of the bed and turned to Marcus. "Go on ahead. I can follow. Dalton will give Alexis a run for his money." He gave Marcus a hard look. "If there is trouble, you'll be needing all the help you can get." He strode past Marcus and out the door.

Cursing, Marcus followed. Three minutes later, they rode.

Marcus yanked Alexis up short and leapt to the ground when he at last sighted Elise's tracks. "They went down here." He squatted, examining where the mare had lost her footing on the mountainside.

"Aye." Michael dismounted.

"The mare threw Elise." Marcus motioned at the wide swath of crushed ground dented from the mare's landing.

He rose, moving slowly forward, ignoring the tracks he knew had to be Campbells as his gaze scanned the ground. He squatted again and carefully ran a finger over a smattering of dried blood on a rock. Marcus looked onto the turf churned up where riders had pulled up hard and fast alongside the place Elise had fallen. He traced the tracks with his fingers, noting the change in weight when they had dismounted.

"If she were dead, they would have left her," Michael said.

"Or they could have kept the body as a bargaining tool. Where is the saddle? It fell off." Marcus scanned the surroundings but found

no sign of the saddle.

"They probably threw it down the mountainside or took it," Michael said.

Marcus stood. Had he not taken the shortcut, he would have noticed the tracks forty minutes ago. "Fetch Johnson from Brahan Seer. He's our finest tracker. I'll follow the tracks."

Marcus grasped his horse's pommel, then froze at the sound of a low moan. "Did you hear," he began, but Michael was already starting down the hill at a near run.

"Michael," Marcus shouted. The fool would break his leg again, or worse.

Marcus raced after the old man and reached him just as a body came into sight beyond the nearest fir tree. Marcus's heart thudded in the instant before his mind registered that it wasn't Elise but a man. Allister, he realized. The young man's father had recently died and Allister had taken over the land his father had tilled.

Marcus dropped to one knee beside him. Allister stared up, eyes dark with pain.

"What happened, lad?" Marcus asked.

He licked his lips, then rasped, "Campbells."

Fear knifed through Marcus. "Elise?" he asked.

"Fell from her horse," Allister managed.

"There was no body, MacGregor," Michael reminded him. "Allister is alive, so is she."

Marcus nodded and forced calm as he made a quick assessment of Allister's injuries. His arm had been gashed and a bruise had begun to form on his forehead, but no blood gushed from any part of his body.

"Can you move?" Marcus asked.

"My leg… broken," he said.

Marcus nodded. "Hurts like the devil, I wager."

Allister winced with what looked like laughter at the obvious understatement.

"Can you manage until help arrives?" he asked.

A steely glint lit the young man's eyes. "Leave me a pistol and any Campbell that comes near will die."

"That's the spirit," Marcus said.

"I got one."

"What?"

"My dirk," the boy said.

"You did well." Marcus rose. "Michael will leave you his weapon. If I overtake the bastards, I plan to use my pistol."

Marcus hurried back up the hill with Michael close behind.

Marcus mounted his horse. "You'll reach Brahan Seer in ten

minutes. I doubt any Campbells stayed behind, but leave the boy your knife as well." Michael nodded. Marcus gave the stallion a kick, and the beast lunged forward.

"MacGregor!" Michael shouted.

Marcus brought Alexis around in a sharp turn.

"Dinna' do anything foolish. We'll be no more than an hour behind. If—when—you find the lass, wait for us."

"Make it forty minutes," Marcus said, and dug his heels into the belly of his horse.

* * * *

Elise blinked. The darkness around her gave way to formless shadows that shifted before her eyes. She jostled and groaned at the pain that spiked in all directions through her body.

"Awake, eh?" The male voice crashed through her head like a wave against a cliff.

She lay in the arms of the speaker, her back against a muscular chest. A distant memory hovered. "Mar—" her voice cracked. Then in a half whisper, "Marcus?"

He grunted. She went rigid. This wasn't Marcus.

Elise closed her eyes, forced back the queasy upheaval of her stomach, then opened her eyes again. All before her looked as if she were looking through a fog. She squinted at the blurring shadows. Slowly, images formed, and she realized she was staring down at the moving ground. They were riding—her mind registered the horse's rhythm beneath them. *The horse's rhythm.* She had been riding—hard. The crystal-clear memory of the mare bearing down on her when she'd been thrown caused her to shudder.

Then she remembered Allister.

Tears sprang to her eyes. The young man had died because of her. His mother—Elise choked back a sob and a wave of dizziness wrenched her stomach. She forced her breathing to slow. At last, the nausea subsided and she shifted. Pain lanced through her head, but she squinted at the blur that had come into view on her right until the figure of a man riding came into focus. He stared unabashedly.

Elise ignored the tremor his stare elicited and looked past him, skyward, where dim points of light showed through thin, grey clouds. She shifted again and found herself staring up at the jut of a square jaw. Above that, the bluish hue of moonbeams filtered through clouds. The pain relaxed to a dull throb and her stomach settled. The clouds parted and the moon blazed in her vision. She squeezed her eyes shut, but registered its position and estimated the time as just past midnight.

"There's been no sign of MacGregor," her captor said.

Marcus would have expected her to be at supper tonight. He might not notice her absence, but Allister's mother would notice his.

"The horses need rest," the other man said. "They're spent."

"We stop up ahead," the man who held her said. "Leave them saddled and tether them."

A few minutes later, they halted. Elise's captor handed her down to the man who had stared at her. He pressed her close to his chest. The hand wrapped around her legs slipped beneath her skirt. She thrashed. Hot spikes of pain fingered out through her body. His hand rubbed her outer thigh. She gave a weak scream. He laughed, lowering his head toward her mouth.

"Rory!" her original keeper shouted, and took her into his arms.

Elise fought tears as he turned and her heart lurched when she caught sight of several more riders dismounting. She kicked and slammed a fist down onto her captor's chest.

"Cease," he growled. "Fighting will do ye no good."

She yielded, too spent to do anything else. He strode to a cluster of medium-sized rocks, then set her down against the rocks and returned to his horse. Rory approached, horse's reins in hand. Elise tensed. Their gazes remained locked until he disappeared from view behind her. Another man followed, then the next and the next, and she realized the horses were being tethered near where she lay.

Her keeper approached carrying a tartan and a small pouch. He stopped beside her, shook out the tartan, and squatted, settling the blanket over her. He regarded her. "We left MacGregor land long ago. You are in Campbell territory and wouldn't have a chance in hell in these hills. You cannot see, but 'tis barren country. Nothing for miles."

"Why—" she stopped, seeing the implacable set of his jaw.

He reached into the pouch and produced a biscuit. He handed it to her. Elise took the food and watched him stride to where his comrades sat huddled on smaller rocks. She looked at the biscuit, then sniffed it. To her surprise, she detected no mold. A small nibble and her stomach rumbled. She pulled her knees up and reached for her foot. She unlaced one boot, took it off, then did the same with the other. She arranged the boots beside her and took another bite of the biscuit, while edging herself into a more prone position. She took another, larger bite.

"We should bind her hands." Rory's voice abruptly broke the silence.

"Touch her and I'll kill you," her captor said through a mouthful of food.

A pause followed, and Elise shivered as much from the threat as the cold. She pulled the tartan up over her shoulders, closing her eyes.

"You wouldn't be wanting her for yourself, would you, William?" Rory demanded.

"She isn't yours, Rory."

"What if she escapes?"

"She was knocked half senseless," William replied. "She couldn't manage it."

"I know women who could," Rory retorted.

"She wouldn't know which way was home." William paused. "She's asleep."

"Easy pickings," Rory commented.

Grunts of approval from the men sitting in the group sounded.

"Mayhap not so easy." William shifted, the sword strapped to his hip scraping against rock.

Elise shrank beneath the tartan and ate the last bit of biscuit. Finally, the men's voices quieted. A moment later, she heard a nearby rustling. She peered past a corner of her tartan and discerned the forms of men lowering themselves to the ground. She recognized William, still sitting with his back to her.

A close snigger told her Rory was among the men bedding down nearby. Her stomach wrenched. She glanced heavenward. Dawn was no more than four hours away. MacGregor territory lay southeast of Campbell land. They had ridden approximately fifteen hours. She could reach Brahan Seer by tomorrow afternoon. Marcus might not welcome her back, but she had to make sure he knew who was responsible for Allister's death. She thought of the wedding band sewed to the lining of her shift. She had planned to go from Michael's to Glasgow and catch the first ship away from Scotland. But Allister deserved recompense just as much as Amelia and Steven.

When snores at last told Elise the men had fallen asleep, she crawled from beneath her blanket. The biscuit had settled her stomach, but the trembling deep within persisted.

"Where are ye going?"

She stopped at the sound of William's voice and twisted to look over her shoulder. He still sat on the rock, back to her.

"I-I need a moment of privacy."

"There are guards," he said.

"What?"

"Out there." He motioned with his head to the blackness beyond their camp.

Her blood chilled, but she forced her body into motion and crawled around the rock.

* * * *

Marcus tensed at sight of a figure moving in the shadows where the Campbell horses were tethered. "Did you notice any of the guards returning to camp?" he demanded of Michael, who squatted beside him on the hill from which they watched.

"Nay," Michael whispered.

Marcus strained to make out the figure's form in the moonlight, but the hill cast too dark a shadow on the valley. "God damn it," he muttered. "If anyone has given away our presence—" The loud neigh of a horse broke the quiet. "What the bloody hell?"

"The horses," Michael hissed as the Campbell horses bolted.

Shouts rose, and the Campbells sprang up and after their mounts.

"What are they up to?" Marcus yanked his gaze back onto the figure in the shadows near the horses. He leaned forward in the saddle and was riding to the left of the camp.

"Take two men and bring back that rider," Marcus said. "Be careful not to alert the others to our presence."

Marcus turned his attention onto the Campbell men running through the trees in an effort to retrieve their scattered horses. Then waited.

The light sound of a boot treading close came from the darkness and Marcus jerked his head around.

"Laird," one of his men said, "come quick. We have the rider."

He pulled his *breacan* close and backed away from the crest of the hill, jumped to his feet, then hurried downhill at a near run. At the bottom, he broke through the circle of his men, hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Nay! Laird, stop!" came a chorus of low voices.

Marcus felt his sword arm jerked back, but he saw the prisoner even as someone grabbed his other arm. He went stock still. "Elise?"

"Yes," she replied.

Even in the shallow light of the cloudy darkness, he could discern her drawn expression. "Are you unharmed?"

She smiled, her mouth quavering a little. "I have a blazing headache, but I'll live."

Marcus started forward, but two of his men seized his arm. "Release me." He yanked free, then took two steps and halted before her. "You are the rider?"

"Yes."

She swayed. Marcus caught her to him.

Elise clutched at his shirt, burying her head in his chest. She didn't move for a long moment, then took a shuddering breath and mumbled against him, "If I could sit down."

He whipped off his cloak and wrapped it around her. Marcus slipped an arm beneath her and she threw her arms around his neck when he lifted her into his arms. He knelt and gently settled her in a seated position on the ground. Her arms remained tight about him for a moment, then finally relaxed.

Marcus straightened, his gaze falling on her bare feet. "Where are your shoes?"

She glanced from her feet back at him. "I took them off. What woman attempting an escape would go barefoot?" She gave him a hopeful look. "Sensible, don't you agree?"

"Sensible?" he repeated.

Elise abruptly grasped her stomach. Marcus held her head to the side as she wretched violently. The convulsion ceased and he wiped her mouth with the tartan.

She sat up. "Had to happen eventually," she croaked.

"Will you be all right?"

She nodded but averted her face. "I'm much better."

Marcus stood. "Michael, you, Brian, and Finn remain here. Get the horses," he said to the remaining men, then looked at Elise. "I assume you freed their horses?"

She nodded.

"Marcus," Michael said. "We stumbled upon two Campbells. They were the guards west of the camp. Seems we were wrong. They had moved. Probably the only ones who had horses."

"Dead?"

The older man nodded.

Marcus's men returned with the horses.

He took Alexis's reins and mounted, then said to Michael, "It may take some time, but I won't leave before catching every last one of the bastards. If so much as a shadow flickers, get out."

Michael nodded, and Marcus reined his horse around, his men following.

* * * *

Marcus stood, legs apart, staring down at Elise. She sat on the couch, head bowed, her gaze on the carpeted floor of his library. He took a deep breath and seated himself beside her.

"A day on the trip home and I held my tongue," he said. "Then a day here at Brahan Seer. You're well enough now to answer to me. What in God's name were you doing?"

"I promised Michael I would come."

"Michael would not hold you to any such promise."

She lifted her chin and met his gaze. "I didn't go alone, as you

know."

"You took a boy, Elise."

Pain flickered across her face. "I will not make that mistake again."

"Nay, you will not, but that doesn't explain why you insist upon going. Bloody hell, Elise, no one but you is a risk-taker."

She stiffened. "I am sorry you had to come for me—"

"*Sorry I had to come for you?* You little idiot. It wasn't the coming for you that you need be sorry for, but the fact you nearly got yourself killed. It's a miracle you survived the fall from your horse."

Marcus shifted his gaze to her right cheek where the light yellow of a severe bruise peeked out from beneath her thick hair. He was well aware of the gash that lay hidden beneath her hair. She had taken great pains to hide the wound. *What else did she hide?*

"What of the Campbells, Elise?"

She frowned. "I don't understand why they took me."

"Nay?"

She started. "I'm not a complete fool. I understand their intentions. But why make off with me? Why not attack me there?"

A mental picture of them *attacking* her there rose on a tide of a fury that forced Marcus to his feet. He strode to the sideboard, poured a whiskey, drank it in one gulp, then set the glass down and faced her. He leaned against the sideboard and folded his arms across his chest.

"They like to savor their victims."

Her lips parted in a soft gasp.

"Did you think otherwise?" he asked.

"The beady-eyed one, Rory, would have taken me there, but their leader, William—"

"William?" Marcus interjected savagely. He started toward her. Her eyes widened when he closed the gap between them. He yanked her from her seat. "What did *William* want, Elise?"

"He stopped Rory from…"

"Did he now?" Marcus shoved her onto the couch, pivoted, and returned to the sideboard. He poured another drink and emptied the glass as he had the last, then faced her again. "It didn't occur to you he didn't want a woman who was used up?"

Her cheeks reddened, then her expression hardened. "There had been no sign of Campbells for weeks. How long am I supposed to let your fears rule me?"

"Until I say otherwise. Just be glad I don't tie you to your bed."

Her eyes narrowed. "What sort of threat is that?"

"The kind I will enforce with relish."

Elise jumped to her feet. She swayed slightly. Marcus started forward, then stopped when she fisted her hands at her sides.

"Ooooh." She drew the word out in a long frustrated breath. "You are an arrogant knave, Marcus MacGregor, not to mention foul natured. Does it give you pleasure to threaten me?"

"Threaten you?" He gave an exasperated laugh. "I haven't given you even a small sample of my power."

"I advise you to keep such threats to yourself," she said through clenched teeth.

"God help me, I should turn you over my knee—which is what I planned in the beginning."

Elise took a step back and he advanced. "In fact, if you have any defense, say your piece now, for you shall receive the only recompense your sex allows."

"I have nothing to tell you." She retreated another pace.

Marcus halted. Bloody hell, were his suspicions right? "What are you hiding, Elise?"

Her eyes flashed but not before widening enough to tell him he'd caught her off guard. "What could I possibly—"

"You're a fool if you expect me to believe you simply want to visit Michael. We both know he is well. Who do you meet when you leave Brahan Seer?"

Her eyes lit with indignation.

Feminine fury. Had he hit the mark? Had she taken a lover?

The blood pounded in his ears. "You would risk death—or worse—for a common liaison?"

Her expression flashed to hauteur. "Any assignations I have are none of your concern."

Relief rammed through him. Womanly pride drove her, not fear of discovery. Why, then, the insistence on going to Michael's?

She turned, but he caught her wrist and whirled her around. "What are you hiding?"

Elise clenched the hand he grasped. "Is it so hard to believe someone might care enough about another human being to take a risk?"

"You expect me to believe you are so foolish?"

She gave a harsh laugh. "Believe what you will."

"I believe you are lying."

"Why bother coming for me, then?"

For the thousandth time, Marcus saw Elise as Katie MacGregor had been when she was found raped and beaten. He yanked Elise to him, his mouth crashing down on hers. She shoved at his chest, but he only tightened his arms around her and roughened the kiss. He thrust his tongue inside her mouth and felt her body stiffen in surprise then slacken against him. Her breath quickened. Marcus remembered the couch only a few feet away, but she abruptly wrenched her mouth

free. He hugged her close, burying his head in her hair.

"Elise," he whispered hoarsely. "When I think—" his voice caught. "They had their hands on you." He hugged her even closer. "Never again."

He kissed her neck, placed gentle kisses behind her ear and down to where neck met shoulder. She gasped, and he lifted his head to look down into her wide eyes. He lowered his mouth to hers, tenderly this time, moving slowly until her lips softened beneath his. She gave a sudden small gasp, then pushed away, her hand going to her lips. He focused on the action.

"Ohhh," she drew out the word on a soft breath.

Marcus stepped toward her. She backed up until the chair before his desk barred her retreat. He halted, his body inches from her. She gripped the top of the chair, then stepped aside, shoving the chair toward him. Marcus reached for her. The chair hit his shin. Pain shot through his leg, but he stumbled forward, grabbing for her. His fingers closed around thin air as she dashed for the door and disappeared down the corridor.

Chapter Six

Movement to his left caused Marcus to jerk his head in the direction of the woman emerging from the kitchen into the hall. She was not Elise. The woman's brown hair had fooled him for an instant. He shoved his chair back, rose from his seat, and strode to the kitchen. He stepped aside for another serving maid as she hurried past into the hall with a plate of food in hand. He scanned the kitchen. Elise wasn't among the women serving the evening meal.

By God, she was avoiding him.

Why she was avoiding him, he knew; how she had managed to do so for a day and a half, he suspected could be answered by Winnie, who, oddly enough, was also absent. He turned and headed for the postern door, wincing at the ache in his knee. Once in the quiet of the brightly lit courtyard, he veered north toward the cottages.

"Marcus."

Marcus glanced over his shoulder at the sound of his father's call and stopped at sight of the MacLaren warrior walking alongside Cameron. They halted in front of Marcus.

"Brian here has brought a message from Declan." Cameron looked at the man. "Go ahead, lad."

"Declan wanted ye to know there's been Campbells on MacLaren land."

"When?" Marcus demanded.

"Three days in a row now."

"You haven't caught any of them?"

Brian snorted. "The bastards are getting better at running."

"They are," Marcus agreed, then asked, "You will stay the night?"

"Aye."

"Good. Be ready at first light. I'll travel back with you. Have some supper." He motioned toward the great hall, then looked back at his father. "Cameron, I wish to speak with you." Marcus waited until Brian was out of earshot, then said, "Have Elise moved into the castle while I am gone."

Cameron showed no surprise at the request. "What reason should I give?"

"Ask if she plans on living with Winnie the rest of her life."

His father gave an approving look. "I will put her in the west wing's private suite."

"Nay," Marcus said. "The east wing, the room nearest mine.

Cameron frowned. "'Tis hard on you, her sharing a cottage with Winnie, but to put her in the lady's quarters next to yours is going a

bit far the other direction."

"The guest room, Cameron," Marcus said. "Not in the adjoining room—at least, not yet."

"*At least, not yet*?" Cameron exclaimed.

Two men passing turned their heads at his raised voice.

He glanced at them, then leaned in closer to Marcus. "That's a bit obvious, don't you think, lad? A man doesna' flaunt his mistress."

Marcus raised a brow. "Aye."

His father blinked. "What? Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"I am."

Cameron rubbed his chin. "I have never known you to take advantage of a woman under your protection."

"I have no intention of doing so now," Marcus replied, though he couldn't help the mental image of how much he would relish *taking advantage*.

Cameron regarded him. "I thought you would not marry again. 'Tis ten years since Jenna died."

"I hadn't planned on remarrying."

"You have a son and, at your age, you need not marry."

Marcus gave a short laugh. "I needn't do much of anything, Father."

Cameron gave a single nod. "Your marriage to Jenna wasn't one of love." His mouth turned down wryly. "You always were the politician. You should have told King George to go to the devil when he insisted you marry the wench."

"I have no regrets," Marcus replied. "And I shall have none now."

"Tiring of the demimonde?"

He gave a slight smile. "'Tis not the same."

Cameron grinned. "I thought you would want the lass, but I hadn't realized how badly."

Marcus exhaled. "No one is more surprised than I."

* * * *

Marcus and his men dismounted in the outer bailey of the MacLaren holding. He tossed his horse's reins to a MacLaren guard and waited. A few moments later, Declan entered the bailey.

Marcus stepped forward and caught Declan's hand in a firm grip. "Good of you to allow us entrance."

Declan's eyes twinkled. "Aye, considering your treatment of me when last I visited Brahan Seer."

"I recall your night ended well."

Declan grinned. "Aye, a fine night it was. What brings you here? Have I ruined the MacGregor lasses for you? Josephine cried when I left."

"I heard she got rather feisty," Marcus remarked.

Declan laughed. "Aye, she's a sassy one, but nothing like your *Ceasg*."

Marcus gave a rueful grimace. "Elise's temper is much like the Highland mermaid's."

"A resemblance? If the lass were a Highlander, she could grant the mythical three wishes." He gave Marcus a shrewd look. "Perhaps she has already granted yours, eh?'

Marcus snorted. "I suspect granting any wish I have is the furthest thing from her mind."

"Ahh," Declan intoned. "You haven't exactly endeared yourself to her?"

"Not quite."

"Mayhap, you should have let me teach her a lesson after all." His brows lifted. "Break her in, so to speak."

"I would have had no sympathy for you when she broke you."

Declan grimaced. "Aye, well, 'tis best, then, that I leave you with the taming."

"God help me," Marcus said under his breath, then gave him a serious look. "I hear you have had Campbells on your land."

"Aye." Declan led Marcus toward the great hall.

"Elise was kidnapped by the Campbells six days ago," Marcus said.

"Kidnapped?" Declan gave Marcus an appraising look. "You don't look broken up like you were with Katie. Is the lass…?"

"She is well, though only by the grace of God. We need to talk."

Marcus shook his head at the serving girl who offered to refill his dinner plate, and she moved to the man sitting to his right.

"They never touched her?" Declan asked.

"Nay."

"Can you be sure?"

"Bruised a bit, but nothing like Katie."

"Aye, well," Declan said, "I suppose if she wasn't in the same shape as Katie…"

"She wasn't," Marcus replied. "Which is damned lucky for the entire Campbell clan."

Declan leaned back in his chair. "Too close for comfort."

"They were within half a mile of Brahan Seer."

"Jesus, they've grown bollocks of late. I am surprised they didn't do the deed right there." His mouth twitched. "You don't suppose they suddenly got religion?" He laughed, giving the table such a slap it

rattled the plates.

"Nay," Marcus replied, his mouth twisting into a grim frown. "But they did meet their maker."

"Good. You have been too soft with them in the past. Aye," he went on when Marcus started to interrupt, "ye made them pay for Katie, but there have been other times."

Declan reached for his mug and took a long draught. He set the mug on the table while watching the serving woman who approached from the far end of the table. She looked up and Declan winked. His gaze remained on her as she passed. He took another drink of ale, then turned back to Marcus.

"They've been spending an unusual amount of time on MacGregor land of late."

"So I have noticed." A pause followed, and Marcus said. "You have something on your mind?"

"'Tis interesting they made off with her. One would expect them to take care of business and be done with it."

"I'm not one to question good fortune," Marcus said.

"But you are." Declan's expression sobered. "What do you know of the lass?"

"She's American, as you know. The ship she and her husband sailed on went down in a fire. Shannon and Joshua found her washed ashore at Solway Firth."

"She is no serving wench," Declan commented.

"Nay."

"Have you any idea why she is acting the part?"

Marcus gave a single shake of his head. "Nay, but I will find out."

* * * *

Hooves pounded on moist ground, the roll of their thunder cutting in heavier strikes as they neared the castle. Swirls of thick fog whipped upwards and into the night as the gates of Brahan Seer swung open by an unseen hand. One after another, men forced their way in until the keep overflowed with the blue and green of Campbell plaide.

Fear lodged in Marcus's throat at sight of his enemies' raised swords.

"Buadhaich!" came the battle cry.

A shudder shook Marcus.

The devils' weapons stabbed through the grey of the murky fog. Pleas for mercy resounded. Still, Marcus remained rooted to the spot, watching until the last MacGregor fell.

A Campbell glanced at him, the first to acknowledge his presence. The man smiled, stepping on the head of a vanquished enemy and grinding

the skull with his foot. As if magically freed from unseen bonds, Marcus lunged at him. They crashed to the ground, Marcus's grasp closing around nothing. He leapt to his feet, seizing another Campbell. He, too, vanished. One by one, they disappeared each time he grabbed their necks. His mind sought for purchase within the ghostly battle, his senses reeling with the echo of laughter that rose from the curling mist.

Finally, every Campbell gone, Marcus stood, his breath coming in labored gulps. Torn and twisted bodies lay scattered about him—the ruin of his clan. A cry broke the silence. He whirled. Elise lay on the ground, a trembling hand raised to him.

Marcus rushed to her side. He fell to his knees, lifted her head, and cradled it in his lap. Tears streamed down his cheeks, splashing onto her lips. With gentle fingers, she wiped a tear from his cheek.

"Shh," she murmured. "It's not your fault." Her hand fell away and her eyes closed.

He tightened his grip but she vanished, causing him to tumble forward. Her garments twisted in his hands. He shoved and kicked, trying to dislodge himself from the fabric. Leaping up, his fingers closed around a post—

Marcus stood in darkness, gasping in heaving gulps of air. His grip on the bedpost tightened as he looked about wildly in the darkness. No moon shone overhead. No bodies lay around him—a soft chime sounded—*a clock*. A shudder reverberated through him and he fell to his knees on the stone floor of the bedchamber. The cold of the floor against his knees contrasted the sweat that beaded his forehead. A drop trickled along his hairline. *A dream.* But Elise's kidnapping had been no dream. Had she not escaped… Marcus bowed his head, the cold barely noticeable to his naked body, and he touched the tear trailing down his cheek.

The clock chimed again. Four gongs this time.

His heartbeat had slowed and his body chilled. Fingers still wrapped around the bedpost, Marcus pulled himself onto shaky legs. He gathered his kilt from the floor near the foot of the bed and wrapped the *plaide* around his waist. Brahan Seer lay but half a day's ride away. Marcus paused.

A dream.

To return home before visiting the young MacFarlene chief would be foolish.

A dream.

His heart rate increased. A dream where everyone he loved had perished. Where Elise had perished. He grabbed his belt from the chair, then halted. He had left the keep well-guarded. He would wake his man Kyle. One day for Kyle to ride to Brahan Seer and make sure all was well, then meet them tomorrow at the MacFarlene holding.

* * * *

Marcus studied the men gathered in the MacFarlene great hall, then returned his attention to Langley, the young MacFarlene chief, who stood beside him at the massive hearth. Marcus set his glass of scotch on the mantel. "No sign of Campbells on your land?"

Langley nodded to one of his men. "Nay." He finished his scotch, then placed the glass next to Marcus's. "If I had, they would be buried—and King George would never find them."

Marcus well remembered Langley's uncle, Cory MacDonald. The MacDonalds had not forgiven the Campbells for the Glencoe massacre over a hundred years ago. MacDonald blood flowed as hotly in Langley's veins as did MacFarlene blood.

"Ye have a spy, MacGregor."

Marcus's attention snapped back to the young man. "What?"

"How else do you explain their success in creeping about your land? You say Shamus was killed in Montal Cove. That isna' MacGregor land. I remember hearing about Katie MacGregor. She was in MacLaren territory when they attacked her." Langley regarded him. "Before this last incident, how long since they were seen on MacGregor land?"

"Two months." Marcus stilled. "The night I escorted Elise back from Michael's."

"The same lass they made off with?" Langley grunted. A young woman carrying several bottles of whiskey wound her way through the crowd. "Brenda," he called. "Bring me one of those bottles, lass."

She turned and hurried forward. He took a bottle from her tray. She glanced at Marcus.

"Off with you," Langley said.

With a flash of a smile for Marcus, she sauntered away.

Langley opened the bottle, filled their glasses, then set the bottle on the mantel. He took a large drink before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Two months ago, you say?"

"Aye," Marcus replied.

"What came of it?"

"Nothing. They were gone when I returned."

"A shame, and a little strange, wouldn't you say?" Langley finished the drink, reached for the bottle, and refilled his glass.

"They may have heard me passing by and ran, or luck might have been with them."

"Aye," Langley agreed. "They're a cowardly lot. But considering they returned, that makes the situation more strange than lucky." He shrugged again. "Think what you like, but you have a spy." He lifted a

brow. "Mayhap it's you they want?"

"They had their chance when they abducted Elise. They knew I would pursue them yet didn't lay in wait for me."

Langley grunted. "The pleasures of the flesh are a powerful distraction."

Marcus's jaw tightened.

"Dinna' lose your temper," the young chief said. "'Tis an observation, nothing more."

"An astute observation," Marcus muttered, then added, "Someone who is reporting the comings and goings."

"What they are reporting, I can't say. But 'tis clear they are hunting. I wager it's big game. 'Course, we will fight alongside you."

Marcus smiled to himself. The clans feuded far less in these modern times, giving a restless Highland heart such as Langley's no outlet for its brand of justice.

"You will stay until tomorrow morning and train?" Langley motioned toward the men who tonight sported with whiskey and lasses, but tomorrow would train hard.

"Aye," Marcus replied, the memory of Kyle's report that all was well at Brahan Seer fresh in his mind.

Langley gave an acknowledging nod, then grabbed the bottle and strode toward several men who vied for the attention of two kitchen maids.

Marcus watched him go. A lot of Langley's father Glen lived in the boy. Glen had refused to give up the old ways and he had fought English injustice the only way he knew how: midnight raids. Marcus smiled, remembering the chief's delight in slaughtering the sheep of an offending lord, then leaving the animals on the lord's doorstep. As a young man, Marcus had ridden with him three days from MacFarlene territory on just such a raid. Unfortunately, Glen went on one too many clandestine rendezvous and was felled by a young baron on the English coast. Marcus understood the battle cry that had driven the old chief. However, in their modern age, it was bad business to consider teaching the Sassenach the error of their ways.

Suddenly, Marcus wearied of politics and war. Even wealth and power hadn't exempted the MacGregors from the English disdain for Highlanders. Still, Ryan MacGregor had done well in choosing a woman of courage. Thank God for a good woman. His loins stirred at the thought of another good woman. Desire swept through him, bringing his body to the now-familiar ache.

Marcus left the revelry. He fell into bed, his body hard with the memory of Elise's touch. In his mind's eye, he saw her wrap slim fingers around his shaft. He reached down, his hand closing over hers. She called to him, her song as sweet as that of any *Ceasg*. He groaned.

Slowly, and with great precision, she pulled him into murky depths where willowy shapes tortured his body and held him hostage long into the night.

* * * *

Elise sighed when Winnie shoved the book across the kitchen table toward her.

"Nay," Winnie shook her head, "I canna' do it. I have no brain for it."

"Ridiculous," Elise snorted. "Now, calm yourself. We aren't finished."

"Aye, we're finished." Winnie jumped from her chair and began pacing. "We're finished for good." She rubbed her temples as if to drive the frustration from her mind.

"But you were doing so beautifully. Come," Elise entreated, "sit and rest."

The housekeeper paused, eyes narrowed, but flung herself into the chair, nonetheless.

Elise repressed a smile when Winnie picked up the offending book and glanced in the direction of the fire. "Winnie—"

"Dinna' try to talk me into any more reading." She dropped the book on the table as if horns had sprouted from the cover. "'Tis no use. I haven't the brain for it."

Elise raised a brow. "Surely you're not afraid of a little effort?"

The housekeeper shot her a shrewd look. "Isna' that and you know it."

Elise shrugged. "It's not for me to judge. You will be the one to explain to your friends why you cannot read to them as promised."

"You think you're mighty smart, eh, lass?" She snatched up the book.

Elise leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. "The next two lines, please."

"O, woo-would, or I," she began slowly, "had seen the d-ay that tre-tra—" She snorted in frustration.

"Treason," Elise prodded softly.

"—treason thu-s cud—"

"Could," Elise corrected.

"Could sell us, my au-ld grey heed—" Winnie grunted, then repeated with vehemence, "head," then again slowly, "had lien in c-l-ay wi' Bruce and loyal Wallace," she ended with a flourish.

"Excellent. Read half an hour tomorrow and the next day. Then we'll review those pages."

Winnie hesitated.

"Don't worry." Elise smiled. "In no time at all you will have everyone in the village begging you to read for them."

"Well, I don't know about that," Winnie replied, but her nonchalant attitude didn't hide the small smile at the corner of her mouth.

"I do," Elise said with conviction.

"So do I," added a deep voice from the kitchen doorway.

Elise twisted in her chair to stare at Marcus

He lounged against the doorframe. "I believe, milady," he addressed Winnie, but never took his eyes off Elise, "if your teacher has her way, you will never have a moment's peace."

"Nothing will have changed then." Winnie sniffed, then rose.

"No need to go," Elise said too quickly.

"Aye, there is." Winnie gave her a knowing look as she brushed past. "Good night to ye, Marcus," she said on the way out the door.

"You're back," was all Elise could say.

"Aye, love. 'Tis my home, remember?" He pushed off from the doorframe, his gaze holding hers as he walked forward. He stopped by her side.

The embers in the fire crackled, causing her to jump. "The fire needs more wood."

He gave no indication he'd heard, then turned and went to the hearth. Marcus grasped the poker and stoked the fire. "How have things been during my absence?"

"The same." She prayed he didn't read into her answer the fact that every day he had been away she had recalled the look on his face when he'd burst through his men and saw her after she escaped the Campbells, and the whispered words *"Never again"* when he pressed her close… and the kiss that had followed.

Marcus reached for a log from the pile beside the hearth. He bent to one knee, his kilt falling across the calf of the bent leg. She tried tearing her gaze away. Instead, her attention fixed on the play of muscle in his shoulder as he tossed the log onto the fire. Here was the reason behind his command to move her into the castle. If she were nearer him, how long could she resist his advances? Damn him. He had further hampered her movements. In the three days he'd been gone, she had yet to leave the castle without someone marking her movements. Had he enlisted all MacGregors as spies?

Marcus unexpectedly glanced back over the shoulder she was staring at. Her heart pounded wildly in the moment he studied her. How transparent were her thoughts? He rose. She tensed when he leaned the poker against the wall and turned.

"Elise," he began as he approached, "I handled things badly." He halted before her.

"Well, you were a bit…" She gave him a rueful look. "I haven't been a saint." Her heart lurched at the understatement, then fluttered at the thought of confessing the truth. What would he do if she threw herself into his arms and told all?

Marcus smiled. "No matter." He extended a hand. "Come, love, walk with me."

She stared at his outstretched hand, held steady for her. The gentleness there belied the strength.

"'Tis all right," he coaxed. "I promise not to bite."

Elise looked up at him. "Are you in the habit of making promises you cannot keep?"

He reached for her and she resisted the urge to slap his hand back.

* * * *

Marcus stood behind Elise on a hill overlooking the village. Lights dotted the valley, shining in haloed rings from the cottages. A balmy breeze blew, yet Marcus saw her shiver.

Marcus resisted the urge to wrap an arm around her and stepped up beside her, fingers laced behind his back. He turned his attention to the flickering lights below. "What do you think of the Highlands, lass?"

She said nothing for a moment, then, in a quiet voice, "The Highlands are… unusual. Despite all odds, life thrives here." She laughed softly. "At least, the Highland notion of life." She slanted a smile in his direction. Marcus stilled, afraid the spell would dissolve. "Highland life is full and lush." She returned her attention to the valley. "Yet, some would say, like a woman, it changes at a moment's notice, suddenly wild and furious."

Did he detect a sensual note in her voice? Marcus tightened the grip on his emotions. Now wasn't the time to test her. Yet a voice from within asked, *If not now, when?*

"The rugged wilderness here is frightening," she went on. "Yet, at the same time, it is compelling to the extreme." Elise motioned with her head at the broad expanse before them. "Those hills lure with a beauty uniquely their own. They call to the soul, drawing it into their mystery like…"

Marcus leaned toward her before catching himself. Inhaling a deep breath, he said in a hushed voice, "Like a lover."

She looked at him, her expression open. "Yes, you've captured the heart of it."

Not yet, love, he thought, but soon, very soon. "How did you come to be in Scotland?"

Surprise flickered on her face, but instantly relaxed into the even reply, "Surely you know I was washed ashore when our ship went down in a fire."

"Aye. I mean, why were you in Solway Firth?" Elise frowned, and he added, "Sailing from America to London, you would pass the south of Ireland. To reach Solway Firth you must pass north of Ireland, then head south between Ireland and Scotland. The route would add a week or more to your journey."

Surprise flashed across her face. "A week?"

"Aye."

Her expression clouded and she murmured, "Amelia."

"What?"

She started. "What?"

"Who is Amelia?"

Elise looked out over the valley. "Amelia was my daughter."

"Was—*Elise*."

She shook her head. "Odd, isn't it? I sail from America for London, am shipwrecked—barely on Scottish soil—and here I am, miles away, in the Highlands."

"Strange, indeed," Marcus murmured, sending up silent thanks for the huge difference in that short distance. "And why come here to Brahan Seer?"

She gave a small laugh. "I had nowhere better to be."

"Are you happy?"

Can you be happy without husband and child?

"Your father has been kind. I liked him the moment I met him."

"What did you think upon first meeting me?" At the startled look on her face, he cursed his foolish curiosity.

"Why, milord," the title fell in teasing accents from her lips and her eyes widened with mock gravity, "I thought you were the fiercest warrior I'd ever had the misfortune to meet."

Marcus blinked, then threw his head back and laughed, for he remembered her assessment of his sword—not to mention his open shirt.

"Sit with me." He took her hand, settled her on the ground, and lowered himself down beside her. Marcus turned his gaze onto her and gave a soft smile. "Tell me about Amelia."

Pain flickered across her features and she lowered her gaze. When, at last, she spoke, her words were flat. "Amelia was six years old and very ill. We were traveling to England to see a specialist. I should have known she wasn't strong enough for the journey—I did know—but I couldn't bear the thought of never again looking upon her sweet face.

"Selfish," she muttered. "When Amelia smiled…" Elise's breath

quickened and Marcus tensed, recognizing the anxiety in the sudden rise and fall of her breasts. "The corners of her eyes crinkled and her eyes sparkled as only a child's can." The moon illuminated Elise's face, revealing the part of memory that couldn't be conquered, and a pain that would never wholly die. "She died three days before the fire."

"*Three days?*" Marcus exclaimed. "Had you not gone by way of Solway Firth—"

"Yes," Elise agreed in a voice far removed from Scotland—from him. "Yes."

"Why take that route?"

She shrugged. "We encountered bad weather and must have been blown off course. I didn't concern myself with the route." The bitterness in her voice said she now counted that a mistake.

Marcus kept to himself the knowledge that a storm couldn't have taken them to Solway Firth had they not been north of Ireland to begin with.

"You can't know what it is to watch your child die." She looked down into her lap where her hands lay clasped. "We could do nothing. When Steven heard of a specialist in England, we set sail immediately. I thank God she died in peace. Facing what came afterwards would have been far worse."

"And the others on the ship?" Marcus asked.

"We traveled on a barque, three-masted. Not a large ship, with only a crew of eleven. Then there was Steven, R-iley and I."

"Riley?" Marcus repeated.

"My husband."

"Who is Steven?"

"My brother." Elise stared out over the valley. "The commotion woke me in the middle of the night. By the time Steven came for me —"

"Steven, not your husband?"

"No. By the time Steven got to my cabin, smoke filled the corridors. He dragged me up on deck. I was sure we wouldn't make it; the corridor was so thick with smoke."

"No chance the ship could be saved?"

"They tried. Flames lapped up from the galley and the sails were ablaze. The wind blew hard. A storm had kicked up and the sails flapped furiously. Oh, how the wind can howl."

"Storms are common in the sound," Marcus said. "What started the fire?"

She grunted, a low but distinctly disgusted sound. "Likely an unattended lamp." She gave a mirthless laugh. "I knew what Steven meant to do. But, damn him, he knew me just as well. He gave me no chance." She looked at Marcus, her gaze burning into him. "Threw me

overboard without so much as a by-your-leave."

"Indeed?"

"Damn you, one and all," she said under her breath.

Marcus cleared his throat. "He managed a boat, I take it?"

"What?" she answered on a distracted note. "Oh, yes." All bitterness had vanished from her voice. "I should have warned him, but I never dreamed—" her voice broke and Marcus realized she was weeping.

"Elise, love."

She shook her head, turning away. He sat up and reached for her. She tried to stand but couldn't manage her skirts quickly enough. He hauled her onto his lap and hugged her close.

"I would like to go home," she said into his shirt between quiet tears.

"Love," he whispered, "you are home."

"Amelia was gone," she said as if not having heard him. "But Steven—"

Some minutes passed. At last, her soft cries subsided and Marcus felt her chest expand with a deep breath. "A piece of him died each day with Amelia. When she—" Elise fumbled in her pocket. Marcus calmed the nervous search by placing his hand over hers. She stilled.

Marcus brushed the tears away with a thumb.

"I should have allowed Amelia to die in her own home," Elise said when he'd finished. "Steven would still be here."

"Steven suggested the doctor? He must have been as anxious as you to see her recover."

"Of course," she answered crossly.

"Could you have stopped him?"

"He couldn't have gone without us. Yes. I could have stopped him."

"Somehow, I doubt that."

"He was a determined fool," she cut in, "but had I told him it was best—"

"He would have carried you onto the ship."

"Damnable men," she muttered.

"What of Amelia's father?"

"He did not survive."

That Marcus knew, but he found it strange that Elise's story didn't include her husband. Too painful, he realized, and said, "I'm sorry, lass."

"Fate is strange," she murmured.

"You can't blame yourself for their deaths," Marcus said.

"You would be amazed at what I can do."

Marcus felt a tremor pass through her. He hugged her closer. "Dinna' say more."

"Seems a bit late for that," she remarked in a dry tone.

He sighed. "Lass, you could remain here quiet all night and I wouldna' complain."

She looked up at him. "It is not… common—for a brother and sister, that is—but Steven was my friend. I shall never find that kind of trust again."

His gaze fell on her left hand and the spot where he knew the scar was on her palm's edge. She hadn't escaped the fire completely unharmed. He took the hand, lifted it to his lips and kissed the scar. He placed the hand around his waist, then slid a hand into her hair and tilted her head upward.

"Are ye sure?" he asked.

Her mouth parted with quiet surprise. He had promised himself he wouldn't touch her. Yet his head lowered and his mouth covered hers of its own volition. Elise offered no resistance when he parted her lips with his tongue. He tightened his hold, the fire in him hot. Still, he kept the kiss soft, his tongue thrusting gently in her mouth. She relaxed. His groin tightened and he ended the kiss. He sighed. His only choice now was to take her home or *take* her there.

Chapter Seven

"*Are you sure?*"

The memory of Marcus's warm breath brushing her skin as he whispered the question made Elise shiver. She squinted up at thick morning sunlight streaming down between heavy storm clouds. Daylight brought no more clarity than had the sleepless night. She paused at the rock, which marked the halfway point on the hill between Brahan Seer and the village, and sat down. She worked the boot from her left foot.

"Infernal pebbles." She turned the boot upside down and shook the irksome item free.

The pebble hit the stony ground with a click. Elise strained to see it, then, shaking her head, stuck her foot in the boot and tugged. Her heel caught on the heel grip. She tugged harder but to no avail.

"Good Lord." She jumped to her feet.

She stomped her foot on the ground. The heel jammed even harder on the heel grip and her foot turned, tumbling her to the ground. She sat for a moment, surveying the skirts thrown up around her thighs, and sighed. Drawing her knees to her, Elise tugged the skirts down over her legs. She propped an elbow on one knee and placed her chin on the heel of a palm.

Foolish endeavor. All the peevishness in the world wouldn't change the fact she wanted him—more than that—hungered for him. Last night had passed in snatches of erotic dreams with Marcus suckling her breasts, then sliding down along her belly and finally between her legs.

Even in better days, Robert hadn't moved her as Marcus had by simply holding her close as he had last night. Her pulse quickened. She had nearly blurted Robert's name. How many more days—and nights—could she hazard with Marcus MacGregor?

* * * *

Marcus glanced at the hearth as he entered his library. The fire burned low but cast enough light so he could make his way through the shadowy darkness to his desk. He lit the candle sitting there and seated himself before an open ledger. Despite the hour, sleep eluded him.

He laughed. "It wouldn't be the taste of Elise's lips that has your mind churning?" he mused, but knew good and well his cock and not his mind was doing the *churning*. He forced his attention to the

numbers.

Sometime later, Marcus glanced at the hearth, abruptly aware of a chill in the room. The fire had all but expired. He rose and went to the fireplace. He threw a log on the dying embers and stoked them. After hooking the poker in the holder, he lowered himself into the armchair beside the hearth. Stretching his legs out before him, he crossed ankle over ankle and relaxed against the cushion. Heat slowly worked its way up his body. He closed his eyes and dozed.

Marcus jerked awake, aware someone had entered the room. He glanced at the mantel clock. Just after two. Who would invade his library at this hour? The shadow cast by the intruder's taper glided across the wall then came to a halt. He heard the clink of the brass holder being placed on his desk and twisted to peer around the edge of his chair. His body tightened when he saw the prowler was none other than the *Caesg* responsible for his sleepless night.

Elise stood, wrapped in a *plaide* blanket, perusing the books on the shelf behind his desk. His gaze dropped to the shoulder laid bare where blanket and chemise had slipped to her arm.

She shivered and drew the blanket closer about her shoulders as she glanced in the direction of the hearth. Their eyes met and he grinned. She started.

Her eyes flashed. "It's extremely impolite to spy on people. Or didn't your mother teach you manners?"

"Aye, love." He grinned even wider. "But you made such a pretty picture standing there, I couldna' help myself. 'Tis verra' unfortunate you spied me so soon."

Her eyes narrowed in the instant before she whirled and headed for the door. Marcus jumped up and, in four long strides, stepped in front of her.

"Now, lass," he drawled in an even thicker brogue, "you wake a man in the middle of the night, then run away so quickly? 'Tis no' verra' bonnie of you, and you are a verra' bonnie lass."

Elise gave him a dry look. "I warn you, Marcus MacGregor, step aside."

He grinned. She was in a fit all right and he felt the desire to see her at full sail.

"Come, love," he said, "what will ye do?"

She didn't answer and his curiosity piqued at the realization that the wheels in her head were turning at a furious rate.

"Do you plan to stand there all night?" she finally said.

He raised a brow and her expression darkened. Marcus gave a hearty laugh. "Do you expect me to capitulate to so easily?" He laughed even harder. "Lass," he shook his head, "you are—" Marcus halted when she started forward.

He reached to grab her shoulders, thinking she meant to escape after all, then realized her intention even as her foot snaked around his boot and yanked. He fell to his backside with a heavy thud. Stunned, he blinked up at her. He suddenly realized how Declan must have felt. Perhaps she did need a lesson. Her gaze darted to the door.

"Should have thought of that before you laid me on my arse," he said. "You have no chance of getting past me without my bringing you to the carpet with me." Marcus looked down the length of her. "A prospect which has its appeal."

She leapt back, but he caught the edge of her blanket and yanked it free.

He took in the bare arms, the hint of rosy nipples beneath the thin night rail, and the shadow cast by the curls between her thighs. Elise glanced down at her scantily clad body. She flushed and an answering flash of heat coursed through him.

"This is unkind of you," she said.

"Unkind?" Marcus cocked a brow. "You dare send me to my backside then lecture me on the etiquette of kindness?"

"A gentleman does not strip a lady of her clothes."

Marcus stood and tossed the blanket well out of her reach. "I have not stripped a lady of her clothes—yet."

Her brow knit and he read genuine indecision in her expression. She took a step back.

Lesson learned, he thought, and started for the blanket, but the sight of a slow smile on her lips halted him.

"Why, Marcus, you fraud. Trying to teach me a lesson."

His heart rate kicked up. Had she no idea what her soft tone did to him? "Love," he scooped her to him, "'tis not the lesson I would teach ye, given the chance."

To his surprise, she didn't pull away but wrapped her arms around his neck. "What lesson would that be, milord?"

He slid a hand up her back and wrapped his fingers in her soft, brown hair. He brought his mouth slowly down on hers. She sighed. He deepened the kiss. She pressed closer. He cupped her buttocks and backed her against the door. He tugged at the strap of her nightgown, pulling it down over her arm. Elise moved her fingers in light movements along his arm.

Marcus groaned. "You keep me on the precipice between heaven and hell."

He bent and took a taut nipple in his mouth, drawing on the pink bud through the fabric of her nightgown. She gripped his shoulders and arched toward him. Marcus ran a flattened palm up her thigh and across the roundness of her buttocks. He continued down to the underside of her knee, then lifted her leg over his hip. The

nightgown rucked up and he rubbed the hard length of him between her legs. She gasped. He trailed moist kisses from neck to ear. She softened against the motion and contours of his body. He became aware of her breasts pressed to his chest, the nipples brushing in tantalizing strokes as he rocked gently against her.

"Elise—" Marcus froze at hearing footsteps in the hallway.

She opened her eyes, confusion mingled with the clouded look of desire. He yanked her away from the door and stepped in front of her as it swung open and a warrior entered.

"Forgive the interruption, laird." The man kept his gaze on Marcus's face. "A rider from Drummond territory is demanding to see you. Says it's important."

Fear displaced passion. *Drummond. At this hour? Had the old chief finally died?*

Marcus gave the man a curt nod. "See him to the hall."

The door closed and Marcus faced Elise. Her cheeks were flooded with color. She had pulled the nightgown straps back over her shoulders and her arms were crossed over her breasts. He reached for her, but she stiffened.

"You have a guest waiting," she said.

He clasped her arm and directed her the few steps to where the discarded *plaide* lay on the carpet. Marcus released her and bent to pick it up. He settled the blanket around her shoulders, drawing her close once again.

"One more stolen moment, aye?" he asked.

Marcus wrapped his arms around her, pinning her arms between them, and kissed her. She breathed through parted lips, and he answered the invitation with a slow thrust of his tongue. He gently drew out her passion until she trembled with the final tracing of his tongue along her lips. He forced himself from her. Her head fell to his shoulder, and relief mixed with the lust still churning in him. He waited, unwilling to part even for his old friend.

She raised her head. "I should go."

Marcus walked with her to the stairwell that led to her chambers. He gave her a final kiss on the cheek. "Go, love." He urged her up the first step.

He watched the sway of the blanket until she disappeared around the bend, then turned on his heel and headed for the great hall.

* * * *

Distant footsteps sounded in the hallway outside the drawing room where Elise sat. She looked up from the book she was reading.

Surely Marcus hadn't returned from the fields so early? She hadn't seen him since last night. If he were to catch her here alone… would they finish what they'd started? The footsteps stopped in front of the door. Her heart thudded. The door swung open and a petite woman, smartly dressed in a burgundy velvet riding habit trimmed in gold, stood in the doorway.

"Have tea served here," the woman ordered Mary, who stood behind her. The woman concentrated on the gloves she peeled from small, elegant hands. "I am hungry, as well. The ride this morning—" She looked up, her gaze on Elise, and she halted the tug on her glove.

No warmth shone in the woman's blue eyes and Elise wondered that such porcelain-like beauty should be marred with a statue's coldness. The woman's expression turned appraising.

"Do Brahan Seer's servants habitually lounge in the drawing room during the day?"

"Just myself," Elise replied.

The woman's gaze sharpened. She stared for a moment, then waved a dismissive hand at Mary.

"Thank ye, Lady Margaret." Mary bobbed a curtsy and backed out of the room, leaving Elise alone with the stranger and an increasing sense of apprehension.

Elise rose, hugging the book to her breast.

"You are American." Lady Margaret yanked off the remaining glove.

Elise halted. "I am."

"How long do you think you can hold his interest?"

Elise frowned. "What—" She froze.

"Let us get to the point," Lady Margaret said in crisp tones. "He is a man, and there are certain things we must accept in men."

Anger heated Elise's belly, but she replied in a cool tone, "Perhaps we have different standards."

Surprise flickered across Margaret's face, then disdain settled on her features. "I have seen it before and with women possessing far more charms than you." She raised a brow. "You are… twenty-six, twenty-seven, perhaps?"

Despite the fact Elise knew it made no difference—tomorrow she would be gone—the barb hit its mark. Marcus never asked her age. He, too, probably thought her younger than her thirty years.

Margaret raked her eyes over Elise in an unladylike fashion. "Men are intrigued by the new and unusual." She waved her hand in the same dismissive manner she had with Mary. "That will change once we are wed."

Elise couldn't prevent a gasp.

Margaret lifted a brow. "He did not tell you? Pity. You can't be

surprised he kept the news from you, of all people."

Elise narrowed her eyes. "Marcus is no liar."

"He hasn't lied. The news has not yet been announced. We are awaiting permission from King George." Margaret regarded her with a curious intensity. "You don't believe me." She laughed, the sound filled with disdain and, to Elise's surprise, pleasure. "Tell me," Margaret said, "do you like the way he slides his tongue over your lips?"

A chill pooled in Elise's belly.

"Or perhaps you find the way he runs his hands along your body more memorable. He is a man who enjoys touching a woman—and let us not forget the way he moves in a deliciously languid motion—"

"What do you want?" Elise demanded.

Margaret slapped her gloves against her hand. "You have nothing I want. His fancy will pass soon enough—as it always does." Then, under her breath, "Though it doesn't please me he has so openly taken his pleasure while I have been away."

While I have been away. A clear explanation for why Marcus had avoided the issue of his wife-to-be.

"He has not taken his pleasure, madam," Elise shot back, remembering all too well how he had nearly done that very thing just last night. How she was just hoping it was he who came looking for her to *take his pleasure.*

Surprise shone on Margaret's face. "Why, there must have been many opportunities…" Her eyes widened. "You mean to marry him."

Elise jerked. "What?"

"You think if you make him wait, he will marry you. My girl, Marcus does not marry out of lust. The Marq—"

"It is quite evident love is not the driving factor in your marriage," Elise snapped.

Margaret's eyes blazed.

"My congratulations, madam. I wish you, Marcus, and all his paramours a happy union." Elise hurried past her toward the door.

"How dare you, you little—"

Elise yanked the door open and slammed it behind her as she stepped into the hallway, leaving Margaret's final words behind. She stumbled forward. Tears clouded her vision. She reached out a hand to the wall, steadying her progress, and discovered she still held the book. She gripped it tighter and took one wobbly step after another until she reached the stairs. She started down, but the sound of voices echoing up the stairwell stopped her. *Cameron*. She turned, scanning the hall for some form of escape, then remembered the small alcove around the bend she had just passed. She dashed up the stairs and down the corridor.

Elise reached the alcove and yanked back the tapestry, nearly falling headlong inside. She straightened, then turned and backed up, stopping only when her shoulders touched cold stone. Sliding to the floor, she dropped the book and hugged her knees to her chest.

"Nay." Even from the distance of the stairwell, Cameron's voice boomed within the narrow confines of the corridor. "'Tis likely he won't be back for several days."

"I hadna' realized he meant to stay so long in the fields," came Daniel's voice.

"He believes the Campbells mean to do mischief during the harvest."

"The guards around the wall remain on double watch," Daniel said.

Elise held her breath as they passed the alcove.

Cameron sighed. "His thirst for revenge is likely never to be quenched. He cannot forgive them for taking Elise."

She stifled a gasp. Winnie's words unexpectedly rang in her mind. "*…it was Marcus who made it clear threats against his own would be met with an iron fist.*"

The male voices faded down the hallway and Elise rose to her feet. She tiptoed to the tapestry and drew the fabric back a fraction. She glanced left then right in the empty corridor, then stepped from the alcove and hurried to the stairs.

Memory of the previous night rose in even more vivid detail than when she'd faced Margaret. If not for the arrival of Marcus's guest, she would have given herself to him. Heat flared in her cheeks. He had held her intimately. So intimately that in her dreams he had caressed her, taken each nipple in his mouth as he slipped a finger between the wet folds of her womanhood. She had never experienced a dream so real… so erotic. Her vision blurred on the stairs and she slowed.

In her dream, it hadn't been him who took her, but she who had willingly parted her thighs, then pulled him between them. She had wrapped her hand around his swollen rod and teased him—teased herself—by rubbing the tip against her throbbing sex, then between the folds before finally guiding him inside her. Elise halted and collapsed back against the wall, her breath heavy and the throb between her legs as real now as it had been in the dream.

The cool of the stone penetrated the thin fabric of her servant's dress. She forced her breathing into a more natural rhythm, then started down the stairs again and didn't stop until she reached her room. Elise closed the door with a soft click. Her knees shook and she suddenly doubted her ability to cross the few paces to the bed.

"Fool," she hissed. She had almost spread her legs for him. A

stab of longing startled her. Dear God, the deed would have meant nothing to him.

The unexpected sound of footsteps racing down the hallway jerked her attention to the door. The light tread belonged to a woman and she approached at a run. Elise darted from the door, headed for the screen in hopes of ducking behind the barrier. The footsteps halted outside her bedchamber and the door burst open before she reached the screen.

"Thank God!" Mary cried.

Elise whirled.

"You must come quickly!" Mary dashed across the room and grabbed her arm, then tugged her toward the door.

"What in God's name is wrong?" Elise wrenched free.

"'Tis Lady Margaret," Mary wailed. "She's in an awful fit and is sure to beat Jinny."

Elise pushed past Mary and rushed from the room, along the corridor, then down the steps into the great hall. She raced across the great hall, coming to a skidding halt in the kitchen.

Jinny cowered in a corner with Margaret standing over her.

"What is the meaning of this?" Elise demanded.

Margaret turned.

"Cease this nonsense," Elise ordered.

Margaret stared, slack-jawed.

"Close your mouth," Elise snapped. "In polite circles, it is considered rude to stare."

Margaret's mouth twisted into a gruesome frown. "How dare you?"

"What right have you to terrorize this household?"

Margaret's eyes gleamed with malicious satisfaction. "I have every right—as you know."

"Don't count your chickens before they are hatched. I venture Marcus will not take kindly to your actions."

"Marcus again, is it?"

Elise recognized the jealousy in the woman's eyes and gave her a calculated look. "Jinny," she addressed the young cook who still cowered, "fetch Cameron."

"Cameron?" Margaret's brows rose in a mocking manner.

"Yes. Jinny, I saw him upstairs only a few minutes ago. He was probably on his way to the library."

"Stay where you are," Margaret threatened.

Jinny's wary glance darted from Margaret to Elise.

"It's all right," Elise urged.

Jinny shot a sidelong look at Margaret, then eased a foot to the side. Lady Margaret took a step toward the girl. Elise slid between

them.

"Don't take your petty jealousy out on her." Elise stepped so close Margaret was forced to look up in order to maintain eye contact. "Are you such a coward you will only fight those who don't have the power to fight back?"

Margaret raised her hand and swung, palm open, for a hard slap. Her gaze flicked past Elise and her eyes widened as a much larger hand intercepted her palm before it hit its intended mark.

"Enough, lass," Cameron commanded softly.

"I—" she began.

"Never mind," he said. "Marcus isna' here. 'Tis best if you go."

Margaret looked as if she would say more but lifted her skirts and headed for the door.

Cameron looked at Elise. "Are you all right, lass?"

She kept her gaze on Margaret's retreating form then, as Margaret stepped from the kitchen to the great hall, Elise started forward. Cameron stayed her with a firm grip on her arm.

"Whoa, lass. Where are you going?"

She shook his hand from her arm. "Why did you interrupt?"

"I heard you tell Jinny to fetch me. I would think you were glad for my timely arrival."

"A timely arrival would have been three seconds later."

"But she would have struck you by then."

Elise saw Margaret open the postern door. "Correct."

"You wanted her to hit you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Elise looked at him. "Because then I could have hit her back."

* * * *

Elise stopped before Winnie's cottage. Her sharp rap on the door quieted the evening crickets and she entered without waiting for an invitation.

Winnie looked up from where she sat at the table. "What's wrong?"

"Something must be wrong?" Elise asked.

Winnie rose and bustled to the door. "Supper is finished and you are visiting me. If you had good news, you would have told me then." Winnie prodded her into a chair at the table, then turned to the hearth and grabbed the kettle from the fire. "Have some tea."

She set a cup in front of Elise, picked up a tea strainer from the basket sitting on the table, and plopped it into the cup. Winnie filled the cup with hot water, then did the same for herself. She replaced the

kettle over the fire, seated herself across from Elise, and stared, an expectant look on her face.

Elise dipped a finger inside her cup and fiddled with the tea strainer so that it bobbed in the water. "I haven't spoken about my life before Brahan Seer."

"Nay."

"Perhaps that was unfair."

A silence drew out between them before Elise said, "The details no longer matter, only that I lost everything. I began again here," a tremor rippled through her at the lie, "but now I see myself entangled in a mess no better than the one I came from."

"A mess?" Winnie repeated.

Elise smiled gently. "By now, all of Brahan Seer knows what happened today between me and Lady Margaret."

"Aye, though no one was surprised by such mischief from Lady Margaret."

Elise lifted a brow. "Indeed?"

"Aye," Winnie said. "She's a bitch."

Elise blinked, then couldn't help laughing.

Winnie frowned. "Well, she is."

Elise released a breath. "That doesn't change the truth… or the fact I must leave."

"Leave?" Winnie snorted. "Surely not because of Lady Margaret?"

Elise leaned forward on the table. "Winnie, he is to marry her."

The older woman's shocked expression said she knew nothing of the betrothal. Elise experienced a sense of relief she hadn't hoped for. Winnie hadn't been a part of the deception.

"I don't believe it," Winnie said.

"No?" Elise asked. "Because you don't like her?"

"Nay." But this time, the denial held less conviction.

"I am going. Tomorrow."

Winnie's brows snapped together. "So soon? Mayhap you should wait just a little while, give Marcus a chance—"

"A chance for what?" *To win me over?* The very thing she couldn't allow. For she would submit, then the leaving would only break her heart all the more. And she would leave. For Amelia. For Steven. And because he had lied to her.

"Marcus is away," she said. "It's better I go now."

"You plan on returning to America?"

Elise nodded.

"I suppose you can manage there as well as here."

"I need your help."

Winnie gave her a wary look. "I dinna' like the look in your

eye."

"I must leave early if I am to reach Glasgow before nightfall. Leaving so early is sure to raise suspicion. If you and I go together to the village—"

"Lord save us." Winnie rolled her eyes heavenward.

"You know it will take trickery."

"Oh, it will take trickery."

"If you know another way?"

"There is a secret passage leading outside the gates."

"A secret passage? Where does it emerge?"

"Near the gate."

"That might work," Elise murmured.

Winnie unexpectedly shook her head. "Nay. 'Tis a bad idea."

"Why?"

"If you are caught, the jig is up. We will do as you said and go early. Only you cannot go all the way to Glasgow alone. Peter will go with you."

"Peter?" Elise's heart thumped. "I won't risk another person's life."

Winnie's face softened. "Peter is no green boy. He's my niece's cousin, a seasoned fighter and a crack shot. And," Winnie paused for emphasis, "he knows nothing of Marcus's, er, desire for you to stay." Elise hesitated, and Winnie added, "He would have returned home anyway. Glasgow is not far out of his way. Trust me, he can get you there safely."

Elise nodded, despite the knot in her throat. God help her if she miscalculated again.

Chapter Eight

Marcus stared at the warrior standing before him in the great hall. The anticipation he had felt only an hour ago had given way to a throbbing in his head that threatened to incite him to violence. "You found her buying a ticket for an Australian-bound packet?" he managed in an even voice.

"Nay, laird," the warrior replied.

"Ah," Marcus said, "I forget, you intercepted her at the pawnbroker's shop."

"Not in the shop, exactly," he hedged.

Marcus glanced at his father, who sat in his chair sipping ale as though they were discussing nothing more important than the weather. Marcus looked back at the warrior. "Where, then?"

"She, er, had left the pawnbroker—you see, Daniel reasoned we couldna' just go inside and take her. She would bring all of Glasgow down upon us."

"Indeed," Marcus murmured.

"She near did—or would have, had we not dragged her into the alley."

"Dragged her into an alley, you say? This alley was deserted then, a place you could have done with her as you wished?"

The man swallowed. "Aye."

"Angry, was she?" Marcus realized he had clenched his hand into a fist.

The man looked sheepish. "You can't blame the lass, she thought—"

"Aye," Marcus interrupted savagely, "I know what she thought. The little fool is damned lucky that isn't what happened. You are certain no Campbell accosted her?"

"Not so much as a scrap of Campbell *plaide* was found between here and Glasgow."

"How far behind were Elise and Daniel when you left them?"

"They were riding fast—not so fast she couldn't keep up," the man added quickly, "but I rode harder. I left them at early light."

"By all rights, they should be arriving anytime," Marcus calculated.

"Aye," the warrior agreed.

Marcus jerked his head toward the postern door in an indication the man should leave, and he hurried from the great hall. Marcus faced his father. "What the bloody hell was she selling—and Australia? I thought Winnie said she was bound for America."

'"Tis strange," Cameron agreed.

"If anything has happened to her…"

Cameron's gaze remained steady. "Ye heard what John said. She is well." He motioned to the seat beside him. "Sit, have an ale, and wait."

"By God, she had three days head start." Marcus slammed a fist down on the table. "*Anything* could have happened."

"Not three, less than two. 'Tis been three days since she left. I can see how you would confuse the time, but our lads took after her night before last. Elise and Peter's tracks indicated they rode slow, and our men rode fast. Did you not comprehend John's report?" Marcus opened his mouth to retort, but Cameron added, "Our men lagged but two hours behind them yesterday afternoon. I sent more men to meet them. They are on their way home and willna' dare dally."

"How could you have let her go?"

"I didn't let her go." Cameron regarded him. "You plan on making her a prisoner?"

"Would you have her alone on that ship?" Marcus demanded.

His father's mouth thinned. "We should beat them both." He glanced in the direction of the kitchen where Winnie worked.

"Aye," Marcus said, agreeing with his father for the first time since he'd returned home an hour ago. "Beat her, I will. If I don't get the chance, I will take it out of your hide, *Father*."

Cameron took a large swig of the ale sitting before him, then set the mug on the table. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "The lads will return with her soon."

Marcus shot his father another unforgiving look. "So you have said a dozen times the past hour."

His father's expression hardened. "I realize you are upset, lad, but you aren't giving me enough credit. Do you believe I would sit here drinking ale if I thought she was in danger?"

Marcus hesitated.

"She will arrive safe."

Tramping feet approached the postern door. Marcus whirled as the door opened and Daniel entered, followed by half a dozen men.

"Where is she?" Marcus demanded.

The men parted to reveal Elise, head downcast, hair damp. Marcus frowned, his first thought was *Why had she not been given a tartan?* But she raised her head and the fire in her eyes ignited an answering fury in him. He strode to her, grabbed her by the shoulders, and began shaking her.

"What do you think you were doing?" He shook her harder with every word.

"Marcus!" Cameron's sharp voice cut through the haze. "You'll shake her to death."

"Or mayhap shake some sense into her." He shoved her away from him and raked his hand through his hair.

"Laird," Daniel said.

Marcus looked at Daniel, who tossed a small pouch to him. He caught it and the clink of coin rattled inside the leather.

"'Tis Elise's—"

Marcus jerked his gaze onto his captain.

"The money she received from the pawnbroker," Daniel finished.

Marcus loosed the tie and emptied the coins into his palm. He counted five sovereign. A small fortune. He looked at Elise. "What were you selling?"

She remained mute. He turned to Daniel.

Daniel cleared his throat. "A wedding ring, according to the bill of sale."

Marcus watched dumbfounded as Daniel produced a piece of paper from within his sporran. He strode to the table and laid the bill of sale on it.

Marcus looked at Elise. "A hefty sum, even for a gold band."

She lifted her chin a fraction. "How did you find me?"

He slipped the coins back into the pouch, then tossed it on the table. "The MacGregor can track you, remember?"

Her cheeks colored and he knew she remembered that day in the meadow when she had threatened him with the MacGregor fury should he harm her and the children. *'I tracked these children. You think he cannot track you?'* she had said.

He broke eye contact. "Go change into dry clothes." Silence followed and he looked to see she hadn't so much as twitched a muscle. Marcus narrowed his eyes. "I warn you, Elise, do no' try my temper any further. Go upstairs. *Now.*"

She remained motionless. He lunged forward and scooped her onto his shoulder. Whoops and cheers rang throughout the room.

"Marcus MacGregor!" She thrashed.

He answered with a hard squeeze to her legs. The men responded with more raucous laughter. Applause followed as he strode across the room and bounded up the stairs. She twisted in his grasp, but Marcus ignored the futile effort until he reached her bedchamber, where he kicked the door open and, in three paces, tossed her onto the bed. She landed on the mattress and immediately made to scramble to her knees. Marcus leapt forward, one knee on the bed, and planted his hands on each side of her.

"Get away!" she shouted as she scooted backwards.

She fell back against the bed when he brought his face to within an inch of hers.

"If you do not change into dry clothes, I will do it for you."

Elise remained motionless, but he caught the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. He pushed away from her and stood. She crawled off the bed, her gaze on him, as she fetched the dress hanging in the closet. She faced him. Marcus waved toward the screen in the corner.

"Kind of you," she retorted.

"Do not try me," he growled.

"Try *you*?" Elise snorted, then stepped behind the screen.

"All I want to know is why?" he demanded.

The rustling of clothing paused. A long moment of silence passed, then she said, "Exactly my question."

Marcus started to reply but threw himself, instead, onto the couch opposite the bed. A moment later, she appeared from behind the screen.

"Why did you leave?" he demanded.

"Why did you bring me back?"

He frowned. "I didn't. Cameron did. I wasn't aware you had left until an hour ago."

"Cameron?" Her eyes darkened. "So I have him to thank for scaring me half out of my wits."

Marcus leapt from the couch. Elise retreated several steps.

"You truly have taken leave of your senses." He stopped two paces from her. "Had I known—had I come for you—I would have given you a scare you wouldn't have forgotten. Being kidnapped by the Campbells clearly left no impression on you."

"I was well out of MacGregor territory when Daniel found me. *I was safe*."

Marcus seized her hand and yanked her close. "So safe you were accosted in an alleyway. And a woman on a ship alone—bound for America—no, Australia. No money, no escort—although, money you had in abundance. Why did you leave?"

Her lips pursed. "That is none of your business."

"None of my business? Bloody hell, Elise, I will have my answers." He yanked her so close he could feel her breath on his face. "Why?"

He twisted her wrist slightly and she winced.

"Elise," he repeated.

Silence followed, then she said, "I decided it was time to go."

Marcus tightened the tenuous hold on his temper. "Well, you can't go." He shoved her away from him. He closed his eyes, massaging the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger.

"I can't go?" she repeated softly.

He whirled on her. "I have just spent one of the most hellish

hours of my life and you think I'll be swayed by your indignation?" Marcus moved an inch closer. "Think again, my sweet." He inched even closer and she backed away from him. "I am the master here, and I will let you push me only so far." He slid closer.

Elise sidled to her left, but he grasped her shoulders. He forced her back against the wall and pressed himself against her. Their eyes locked. He broke the standoff, his gaze dropping to her lips. The beat of his heart pounded against the swell of her breasts. He breathed deep, then pulled her to the couch and shoved her onto the cushion.

"Now, what is this foolishness?"

"I can't stay here forever. It's time I go."

"It is not," he growled.

Elise jumped.

"Do not move. I won't strike you. Though, God knows, I would love nothing more than to turn you over my knee."

"Comforting," she said with a snort.

"Listen, you little fool, when I think it's time for you to go, *if* I ever think it's time for you to go, I will tell you."

"You can't stop me."

Marcus stared. "You think I can't stop you? I can do anything I damn well please." Though this was the first time he'd used his power to take advantage of a woman. *"Do you plan on making her a prisoner?"* his father had asked.

"Cameron is master here, not you," Elise said. "He can let me go."

"There's no real difference between my father's authority and mine."

"There is enough difference. If he says I can go, then I can."

"It doesn't matter. He will not."

"You are so sure?"

Marcus exhaled loudly.

"You don't mind, then, if I ask." She stood.

He couldn't believe it. "You would ask him?"

Elise raised a brow. "Afraid?"

Marcus paused. "You will let this rest if he agrees with me?"

"He won't."

Marcus followed two paces behind as Elise stepped from the staircase into the great hall moments later. It was mid-afternoon, and only the men who had fetched her home lingered in the hall with Cameron. She smiled and approached him while Marcus sauntered to the hearth and propped an elbow on the large mantle. Elise stopped before Cameron, who glanced from her to Marcus, then back again.

"I would like to speak with you, Cameron," she said.

He motioned the men to leave. She seated herself in the chair

beside his. Once the men were gone, he looked expectantly at her.

"Marcus tells me I can't leave."

"'Tis his decision."

"You can countermand this edict."

Cameron laughed. "I can, but will not."

"Aren't I free?" she asked. "Don't I fall under the same law as every Highlander?"

Cameron's mouth twitched and he looked at Marcus. Marcus raised a brow and his father turned back to her. "Why do you want to leave, lass? Have we not been good to you? Have no' we cared for you as one of our own?" His expression softened. "You're a sweet lass. We would miss you."

Her eyes narrowed. "I feel certain you would survive quite well without me." Her voice quieted. "I don't belong here."

He frowned. "Who has been filling your head with such silliness?"

She hesitated. "No one. It's simply obvious, is all."

"Nonsense."

Elise leaned on the table and said in lowered tones, "I must go."

"Why?"

She dropped her gaze to her hands clasped atop the table. "There are certain… rumors about me."

His brow furrowed. "Such as?"

Elise leaned closer. "It is said that I am Marcus's mistress."

"What?" Cameron burst out.

Marcus dropped his elbow from the mantel.

"Nay, lad." His father held up a hand. "Stand where you are." Marcus halted and Cameron focused again on Elise. "Who said this?"

She shook her head. "That isn't important."

"But it is."

"No—"

"If I am to consider any petition," he interrupted, "I must know all the facts."

After a moment's silence, she mumbled an answer.

"What? Speak up, lass."

Marcus strained, but missed the single word she repeated.

"Margaret?" Cameron repeated loudly.

Marcus started forward.

His father's attention jerked to him. "Hold, Marcus." Their gazes locked, Cameron's mouth twitching, then he looked back at Elise. "Is this what the two of you were fashin' over?"

"Margaret?" Marcus echoed.

Elise released an audible groan.

Cameron looked at him. "You should have seen 'em. Had I not

arrived when I did—"

"It isn't funny," Elise snapped.

"Aye, lass"—his shoulders began to shake with laughter—"it is."

"All this over a silly conversation with Margaret?" Marcus demanded.

"It would seem so," Cameron said between fits of laughter.

"I will put an end to Margaret's troublemaking." Marcus muttered. His father had been right; he should have dallied with the demimonde and left the noblewomen to their own devices.

Elise grabbed Cameron's arm. "But, Cameron," she shook his arm, "it's not true."

"Wha—"

"She's lying," Elise insisted

Marcus's mind snapped to attention.

Cameron gave a final grunt, then sobered. He focused on Marcus. "Is this true? I had thought—" he broke off with a slight cough and a sideways glance at Elise.

Marcus swung his gaze onto Elise. "What are you doing?"

"Marcus," Cameron cut him off.

Marcus looked at his father.

"Is it true?" Cameron repeated.

"Damn close," Marcus replied with force.

"Marcus!" Elise cried.

"Do not act as if it isn't true," he replied irritably.

She shot to her feet. "You are no gentleman, sir."

"Elise," his father said, "sit."

She cast a dark glance at Marcus. He raised a brow, but she did as ordered and reseated herself.

Cameron addressed Marcus. "Is it true, lad?"

"Aye, she speaks the truth."

"Margaret ought not to have lied." Cameron gave Marcus a quick glance. "'Course, she had no way of knowing it was a lie." He rubbed his chin. "If ye don't belong to Marcus—"

"Cameron!" Marcus strode across the room to his father's side.

Elise leapt from her chair. "Be quiet, Marcus MacGregor, and let your father speak."

"She may have a point," Cameron said.

Marcus kept his gaze on Cameron. "Father," he growled, "you know my feelings on this."

"Aye, lad, but if you haven't done anything about it yet—"

"Cameron—"

"I warn you, Marcus." Elise stalked toward him. "Remain silent and let your father finish, or I'll…" she stopped, looking wildly about the room. Her gaze stopped on the weapons mounted on the wall, and

she ran to them.

Marcus cast his father a look and they both burst out laughing. Elise made a frustrated sound as she began tugging on a scabbard containing a large sword. The weapon remained fixed and she moved to another. That one didn't budge, nor the next or the next.

"Elise, lass," Cameron said between howls of laughter, "you're tugging on the scabbards." He laughed even harder. "If you wish to draw a weapon"—he slapped the table with his hand, "grab the"—he gasped with laughter—"hilt." He doubled over with laughter. "By God," he wheezed, "are ye sure you're not Irish, lass?"

"Irish?" She laid a hand on the hilt of a lady's *sgian dubh* mounted above the swords she had already tried. "You've never seen an Irish temper like my father's. Except, perhaps"—she turned back to the wall—"mine."

Elise pulled the dagger free of its scabbard. She stepped a pace from the wall, drew back, and threw the knife. The *sgian dubh* whizzed between Marcus and his father, entering the wooden table with a loud *thwang*.

Aside from a "Sweet mother of God" from the kitchen doorway, silence reigned. Both men stared at the knife.

Marcus pulled the dagger free of the wood and held it up, looking at her. "You missed."

She raised a brow. "I did not."

"Sweet mother of God," Cameron repeated. "Where did you learn to throw a knife like that?"

She gave him a disgusted look.

"Are you sure you want her, Marcus?"

"Aye," he replied, not taking his eyes off her.

Cameron slapped the table again. "A Celtish woman who can throw a knife. I knew I liked you." He patted the chair. "Come, sit."

Marcus tensed for the moment she studied them before crossing to the chair and reseating herself.

Cameron leaned back in his chair. "Why didn't you tell us you are Celt?"

"I didn't know it mattered."

He gave Marcus a satisfied look.

"What?" she demanded. "What has happened?"

"'Tis as you said," Cameron said, "you fall under Highland law. You're an Irishwoman. We are family."

"I am free to go, then?"

"Well," he answered slowly, "'tis not so easy."

"But Winnie said any clansman who didn't agree with their clan could leave."

Cameron's lips thinned. "I wouldn't speak of Winnie. That isn't

working in your favor."

"But—"

He shook his head. "She would be the first to admit that she wasn't talking about women traipsing off alone."

"What?"

Cameron gave her a considering look. "Did she not send Peter with you?"

"Yes, bu—"

"And did she not tell you it was a bad idea?"

"I wouldn't say—"

Cameron raised a brow.

"I have a right to come and go as I please."

"You're a woman," he insisted. "You must submit to your lord."

She stiffened. "I have no lord. I am unmarried."

"All women have a lord," he explained gently.

Elise shook her head. "I am free."

"Aye, you are a free woman—not a slave—but I am your lord."

"You? Ridiculous."

"You are under my roof. You are a part of us."

"Cameron—"

"It would be wrong of me to let you go," he interrupted gruffly. "You should never have run off in the first place."

"But you were going to let me go," she insisted.

He shrugged. "I was considering it, but I hadn't made up my mind either."

Elise jumped up and whirled on Marcus. "This is your fault."

"My fault? This was your idea."

"Now, lass," Cameron interjected, "tomorrow Marcus will deal with Margaret and she'll never interfere again."

Elise turned on Cameron. "Cameron, please—"

He brought his palm down on the table. "Enough." He looked to Marcus. "Marcus, take her upstairs and put her to bed—once and for all."

Marcus took hold of her arm. She started to resist, but Cameron gave a single shake of his head. Marcus prodded her toward the stairs and her shoulders slumped.

"This is wrong," she said, taking the stairs with deliberate slowness.

"It's finished," Marcus replied.

"You have nothing to say about it."

"I have been patient," he said, as they reached the top of the stairs.

"I never asked for your patience."

He placed a hand on her back and urged her down the hallway

at a quicker pace. "Count yourself fortunate that's what you've gotten. Now go to bed."

They came to a halt before her bedchamber door.

"I'll go to bed when I am good and ready," she retorted.

Marcus leaned in close behind her. "Go to bed before it's too late."

She shook her head.

"You play a dangerous game." He opened the bedchamber door and shoved her inside.

"What the devil are you talking about?"

He stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him. "By God, did your husband teach you nothing of respect? What of trust"—desire flared to life inside him—"or…desire?"

Elise paled.

Marcus started at her sudden expression of pain. "Bloody hell." He reached her side in an instant. "Forgive me, love."

She turned away, but he grasped her shoulders.

"Please go," she said, her head averted.

"Did you love him deeply?" Marcus asked. She grasped his wrist and tried to disengage them from her hands, but he tightened his grip. "Elise?"

She lifted her head and met his gaze. "*No*."

Marcus blinked. Her eyes widened and he was unsure if he read fear or remorse. "What happened?" he asked.

Her expression hardened. "That is none of your concern."

"Mayhap, but I want the answer."

At first it seemed she wouldn't comply, then in a tired voice, "Riley shouldn't have married. He didn't want the ties of a wife, and certainly not the responsibilities of a child."

"How can a man not love a beautiful wife who gives him children in his own image?"

She dropped her gaze, but he didn't miss the scarlet that crept up her cheeks.

"Elise."

"You have your answers. Now go."

With a finger, he forced her chin upwards. "The man was a fool. How he could not want you—"

She twisted from his grasp. "I never said he didn't want me. We had a daughter."

"A child need not come of passion."

She shot him a defiant look. "You tread on dangerous ground."

He slid an arm around her back. "Tell me, love, did he kiss you like this?"

Marcus pressed his mouth to hers, gently caressing her lips with

his. She squirmed, but he tightened his hold. Slowly deepening the kiss, he parted her lips with his tongue, tasting the hot moistness of her mouth and encouraging her to enjoy him. Her breath quickened, and he slid wet kisses across the smooth skin of her neck. He grazed a breast with his hand and felt her sharp intake of breath. He kissed her mouth, harder this time. At last, he released her.

Elise looked into his eyes, her expression flat. "That is lust. Any man can feel lust."

"True," Marcus agreed. "And I can find a woman to satisfy lust. But this is need. A need," he cupped her bottom, pressing her to him, "born of strong desire, fueled by something much deeper. This leads to true passion."

Keeping her close, he lifted her from the floor and carried her to the bed. He settled her upon the bed, then lay down beside her.

"This is a need so great it drives a man wild." He stroked her neck. "That's what I felt our first meeting in the meadow. You have no idea what you do to me." He nuzzled her neck. "Even the ride home with you in my lap was painful." He kissed her neck. She shook her head, but he went on. "Just the thought of you incites me like a raging fire."

Marcus rolled onto her. He stroked her shoulder, then slid his hand down to cover a breast. He kissed the base of her neck. She gripped his shoulders and it seemed she would resist. He slipped a finger inside her bodice and brushed a nipple. Her hold tightened on his shoulders.

"Sweet," he whispered, "ye are beautiful. I want you." He tugged her bodice down and grasped the nipple between thumb and forefinger, rolling it gently. She arched a breath's movement toward him. "Aye," he coaxed. "You want me." He moved against her. "Tell me you want me. Come, sweet, surely you can give me those simple words." He kissed her, moving against her more ardently.

She abruptly shoved at him. He rocked against her again. She shoved harder.

"No," she said in a voice hoarse with effort.

"Wha—?" He tried to focus his eyes.

She arched.

"*Elise*." He buried his head in her hair.

"Get off me." Her fingernails pressed through his shirt, biting into his shoulder.

Marcus lifted his head. "What has happened? What's wrong?"

Elise pushed harder, grunting with the useless effort. "I will not be your mistress."

He frowned. "I'm not asking you to be my mistress."

She stopped pushing at him. "Then what is this all about?"

"What does it look like?"

"Why don't you ask the woman you are going to marry?"

"I would be glad to, if she would allow it."

Elise stared. "What kind of man involves his future wife with his mistress?" She began struggling again. "Let me go!"

"Not until you explain what this is about."

"I have told you."

"Nay. You've only spoken in riddles."

"I'm sure Margaret would not think it was much of a riddle," she retorted.

"Margaret? You're still fretting about her silly comments? I told you, tomorrow I will—" The horrified look on Elise's face halted him.

"Marcus," she said in a trembling voice, "if you have any feeling for me, you will not do this. Margaret made it perfectly clear how she felt about you flaunting your mistress—"

"Flaunting my mistress?" Anger flooded him. "This is none of her bloody affair."

"None of her affair? For God's sake, you are to marry her. I certainly wouldn't—"

"I what?"

Elise blanched.

"Margaret," he said through gritted teeth, "I will wring your meddling little neck."

Elise bristled. "You have no right to be angry just because she spoiled your plans."

"Aye, but I do."

"You think you can use women as pawns."

"Love—"

"Do not address me in that familiar fashion. I tell you, I will not be your mistress." She struggled beneath him. "I won't change my mind, no matter what you say."

Marcus caught her face between his hands. "No matter what I say?"

She tried shaking her head, but he held her firm.

"I am happy to hear that," he said. "For 'tis not Margaret I intend to marry, but you."

Chapter Nine

A hard knock sounded on the door of Winnie's cottage. Elise started from her concentration on the teacup Winnie stood filling with hot water. They exchanged a questioning look before Winnie called "Come in" as she turned and replaced the kettle over the fire.

The door opened and Mary entered. She brushed back the shawl thrown over her head as cover against the light rain and addressed Elise. "Ye must come to the castle."

"Why?"

"'Tis the MacGregor's command."

Elise bristled. His imperious commands—her stomach did a somersault—were those of a husband-to-be. She summoned a believable amount of female condescension. "What does he want?"

"He and Lady Ross are in his library. Says you must come without delay."

"Margaret?" Elise shot a glance at Winnie.

"The man keeps his promises," Winnie remarked.

"The *man* is an idiot." Elise turned back to Mary. "Tell him I'm busy."

The girl gasped. "I canna' do that. He'll have my hide."

Elise's stomach gave another turn. It was her hide he wanted.

Tell him the truth, her mind insisted, but she ignored the urging now as she had last night when Marcus said it was her he wanted to marry and not Margaret. He wasn't the sort of man who would let his wife set off to America with the intention of avenging herself against a killer. And Amelia and Steven deserved more than to be forgotten at sea.

"Tell him I'm busy," Elise said.

Mary shot Winnie a beseeching look, but Winnie shrugged. "Lady Margaret can go to the devil."

Mary looked at Elise again. "You can't refuse."

Elise gave a single shake of her head. Mary looked from one to the other, then whirled and left the cottage.

Elise still sat across the table from Winnie, deep in conversation, when another rap sounded on the cottage door, this one sharper than the last.

"Who in the world?" Winnie complained. She hurried to the door and threw it open. "Marcus." The housekeeper stepped back.

Elise flicked her gaze from Marcus to Margaret, who stood beside him, then narrowed her eyes on him. He lifted a brow as if to ask where she would now hide and, despite her efforts, her heartbeat accelerated.

"May we?" Marcus indicated the interior of the cottage with a nod.

"Aye, of course." Winnie stepped clear of the doorway.

Margaret glided into the room ahead of him and sat in the chair Winnie had occupied. Marcus leaned against the doorframe.

A moment of silence passed before Margaret addressed Elise. "I understand there has been a misunderstanding between us."

For the hundredth time, Elise thanked God for the *misunderstanding*. Otherwise, Marcus would have looked deeper for the reason behind her running away.

"I wish to apologize for any distress I caused," Margaret said.

Elise quirked a brow. A tinge of red heightened the color in the woman's cheeks. Satisfaction shot through Elise. What would the woman think of Marcus's marriage proposal to a lowly servant? The thought vanished with the realization that Marcus might have told her. Who else might he have told? The possibility of spending the rest of her life with this man—

"I regret you misinterpreted my words," Lady Ross went on.

"I understood you perfectly," Elise replied.

Another long silence drew out before Margaret looked at Marcus. "Now that this is all settled, your—" She stopped, and Elise caught sight of the now hard set of his jaw. Margaret turned her attention back to Elise. "We understand one another, then?"

"We do."

Lady Ross angled her head. "I shall be going." She glanced at Marcus. "If I may?"

With a brusque nod, he straightened from the doorframe. "Winnie, escort Lady Ross to the stables, if you please."

Margaret rose and walked to the door. She paused beside Marcus as though to say something but, with a curtsy, left with Winnie closing the door behind them.

When they'd gone, he closed the door and faced Elise. "I sent for you."

"Yes."

"Yet you forced me to bring Margaret to you."

"Yes."

"And when we arrived, you were less than gracious."

"*Milord*," Elise said in exaggerated tones, "you can force me to sit quietly while you issue commands, but you cannot force me to agree."

Marcus blinked, then started toward her. She tensed as he threw himself into the chair beside hers, folded his arms across his chest, and regarded her.

"Is it so difficult to do as I ask?"

"In this case, yes," she replied.

"This request, then, went against your… moral fiber?"

"That is one way of putting it."

A gleam appeared in his eye and a prickle of dread crept up her neck.

"This means," he went on, "you will honor future *requests* so long as they do not go against your moral convictions?"

"Perhaps," she answered tentatively.

"Mayhap a distraction would help." His gaze held hers. "Would you like to know what sort of distraction I have in mind?"

"No," she replied, and mentally cursed the all-too-quick response.

"Too late."

Marcus stood. In one quick motion, he grasped her waist and lifted her onto the table. With a single finger, he tilted her chin upward so she was forced to look directly into his eyes.

"I have found my threats are meaningless. Probably because you know I am incapable of carrying them out against your beautiful body."

He shifted his gaze to her neck and moved his finger lightly on the hollow of her throat. Elise tried to quell the quiver in her stomach, but the almost imperceptible, yet arrogant twitch at the corner of his mouth said she hadn't been completely successful.

"I am, however, more than willing to do this every time you disobey me." He cupped the nape of her neck as he bent and covered her mouth with his.

Elise twisted in an effort to distance their bodies. Marcus gave a satisfied grunt and shoved her thighs apart with his knee. He pulled her close, pressing her stomach against his erection. A gust of desire startled Elise. He slipped a hand beneath her skirt.

She wriggled in an attempt to break the kiss. Her belly rubbed across his hard shaft. She jerked back, but he hugged her closer as he traced circles up her inner thigh. She seized his shoulders and tried to shake his immoveable body. His tongue slipped past her lips and thrust gently against her tongue.

In her mind's eye, she saw him ease her back onto the table and pull up her dress until she lay bared before him. How easily he could spread her legs, then lift his kilt and—Elise jolted. His hand had moved farther up her thigh. She swayed with dizziness. Body and mind seemed connected only through the roiling in her stomach. His fingers brushed the sensitive skin on the uppermost part of her thigh.

Elise tore her mouth from his and buried her head in his shoulder. "Enough," she said between heavy breaths.

His hand stilled. "Have I selected an effective distraction?"

"You know perfectly well what you've done."

Marcus removed his hand from her thigh, then grasped her shoulders, holding her at arm's length. "Beware," he said, and something suspiciously close to a smile played on his mouth, "for, if I find you disobeying me too often, I will conclude you crave the *distraction*."

Realization washed over her. "You odious man!" She pushed him from her.

Clutching his breast, Marcus took a step back. "You wound me, my sweet."

"I'm in no mood for games." She stood and began smoothing her rumpled skirts, slowing the action upon seeing her hands tremble.

"I assure you," he said with a seriousness that yanked her attention onto him, "this is no game." The glitter in his eyes reflected the edge in his voice.

Elise stared. "You can't be serious. You wouldn't…"

"Do what I have just done? That and more. Passion is a powerful distraction."

His gaze held hers and she knew he was remembering his final words before leaving her room last night, *"I will wed you."*

He abruptly turned and strode to the door.

Elise tried tearing her gaze from his muscled calves but found herself unable to blink until the door closed softly behind him. How was she going to get out of this mess? If she told him she didn't love him, he wouldn't believe her.

* * * *

Elise sat on the bed beside Chloe, gripping the girl's hands and keeping them pressed against the mattress as Winnie placed a hand on Chloe's stomach. Her deft fingers inched along the skin until she located the unborn child's buttocks. Winnie pressed hard, trying once again to coax the buttocks away from the birthing canal. Elise rubbed her forehead against her shoulder in an effort to brush back sweat-matted hair from her eyes.

Winnie suddenly pushed hard on the baby's rear. Chloe flinched, crying out. Elise twisted and met the older woman's gaze. Winnie straightened and gave a small but significant shake of her head. Elise gently massaged Chloe's wrists before reaching for the rag floating in a water basin beside the bed. Elise wrung out the rag and wiped the girl's forehead. Chloe writhed.

"Shhh," Elise soothed. "It'll soon be over."

"Nay!" Chloe shoved at her hand. "I've killed my own bairn."

Elise wiped Chloe's neck. The girl's body clenched. "Winnie!"

Elise called, but Winnie was already pressing down on the baby.

Chloe jerked and would have bolted upright, but Elise grabbed her shoulders and shoved her deep into the mattress.

"I've killed him," Chloe whimpered.

She relaxed, the contraction receding, but her weeping continued. Elise looked at Winnie, who again placed a hand over the baby's buttocks and tried forcing the head into position. Elise watched the skillful hands at work. Winnie had an uncanny knack for understanding the core of a problem. She always had some potion ready for any ailment. But no potion could be concocted for Chloe. The girl no longer wept. She lay, eyes closed, her tear-stained face resigned.

With a short nod to Elise, Winnie pressed down on Chloe's stomach again. Elise held Chloe's arms. The girl did little more than grunt when Winnie bore down on her stomach. Another contraction struck. Chloe's hips arched off the bed. Elise bit her lip to keep the tears in check. How much more could the girl endure? She'd labored for twenty-two hours. Soon, she would grow too weak to birth the child.

Winnie pressed down on the baby for an agonizing hour and a half, then abruptly took a quick step back and reached beneath the sheet covering Chloe's legs. Elise felt a sudden jerk on Chloe's body, and the girl nearly wrenched free of her hold.

"Hold her!" Winnie shouted.

Elise closed her eyes. Chloe screamed. Elise heard a loud swooshing noise and her eyes shot open as Chloe went limp.

No loud wail followed.

Chloe bolted upright. "Give him to me!"

"Now, Chloe," Winnie cooed, her back to them. "Let me take the babe and—"

"Nay!" Chloe screamed. "*Give me my bairn.*"

Winnie looked over her shoulder. "Chloe, 'tis best if ye don't see him." Her eyes softened. "Trust me, lass, I know."

Chloe looked at Winnie, her face suddenly far older than her nineteen years. "He's mine. I have the right to hold him." Her pained expression deepened.

A pain of the soul, not the body. One Elise knew all too well.

"The bairn is a part of me," Chloe ended simply.

Winnie sighed, then faced them. Elise told herself to avert her gaze, but maternal instinct, the memory of her own lost child, brought her gaze to bear on the beautifully formed babe. Winnie placed him in his mother's arms. Chloe cradled him as tenderly as if he had lived. She wiped the blood from his face, then traced his mouth with a gentle finger. She looked up at Winnie.

"He has Daniel's mouth."

"Aye," Winnie replied.

Chloe began to rock as she sang in a low voice. The Gaelic words were as Greek to Elise but the meaning was clear. Unshed tears stung her eyes. The picture of mother and child blurred with the memory of holding her own dear Amelia, the feel of her daughter's skin, baby soft against her breast. Elise's gaze focused on the blood-smeared body of Chloe's child. Were things so different for her? Did Chloe love the nameless child any less than she had loved Amelia?

Love had deepened for Amelia as time passed. Yet she and Chloe shared the same pain that came with lost possibilities. The young woman had glimpsed her husband in their child. Elise had seen much of Robert in Amelia. Who would the children have grown up to be? Who would they have fallen in love with? What children might they have brought into the world?

Winnie snatched the child from Chloe's arms. Chloe's tear-filled gaze locked on the babe as Winnie whirled and disappeared through the door. Elise froze. She was alone with the grief stricken mother. Her own loss, instead of creating a bridge between them, had widened the chasm, bringing her to the precipice where roiled unrealized emotions, more bittersweet memories—and another, deeper, more concrete conviction that she, too, had failed as a mother.

"I killed him," Chloe whispered.

Elise stared. When had it happened? What had been the defining moment in history when womankind became convinced that if anything went awry in the lives of those they loved, they were somehow responsible? Had it begun with Eve? Had the beguiling serpent planted the seed that all mankind would suffer as a result of her misdeed? Elise fell to her knees beside Chloe's bed.

"No." She took the shaking girl into her arms. "It isn't your fault. It's no one's fault."

Chloe clung to her, her tears bathing Elise's neck.

It seemed hours later when Elise heard the creak of the door and looked up to see Winnie standing in the doorway. Winnie's gaze went to Chloe, who slept, then came back to Elise. Elise rose from the bed and tiptoed across the floor. Winnie stepped from the doorway and Elise followed, quietly closing the door behind her. The porch, not long ago filled with friends and neighbors joyously awaiting the arrival of the newest MacGregor, now held only silence.

"You told Daniel?" Elise asked.

"Aye."

"Where is he?"

She nodded to the left of the cottage where the path led into the cover of the moonless night. Elise started down the steps.

"Perhaps ye had best leave him to his grief," Winnie offered.

Elise paused, then disappeared into the darkness.

Daniel hadn't gone far. She saw him, arm outstretched on a tree, shoulders shaking with silent tears. She halted a few feet from him. "Daniel." She heard his quick intake of breath and stepped closer in order to put a hand on his shoulder. "Daniel."

His shoulder stiffened beneath her fingers. She turned him toward her. Without hesitation he fell into her arms and wept.

"A son," he said between sobs.

"I know," she replied, and his tears fell even more freely.

At last, he released her and stepped back. He straightened, again the proud warrior. Elise breathed a silent sigh of relief. He would recover. Now for Chloe. "Daniel, the loss of the child is terrible, but you have something else which must be dealt with now."

"What?"

"Chloe."

"Is something amiss? Winnie said she would live." He looked as if he would race back to the cottage.

"No," Elise quickly put in, "you misunderstand. She will live. However…" Elise hesitated. These Highland men weren't known for having a deep understanding of their women, and she, a stranger, stood before one of them, presuming to tell him how to better deal with one of his own.

"Out with it," he growled. "If she is in danger—" His voice lowered. "Did Winnie lie?" He seized her shoulders.

Elise laid a hand on his arm. "The danger doesn't lie with her body, but her heart."

"Her heart?"

"She blames herself. What's worse, she believes you blame her."

His hands dropped away. "Of course I don't blame her."

"She thinks otherwise."

He gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "She'll think differently tomorrow."

Anger shot through Elise. "You, sir, have no idea what a woman thinks."

A silence drew out between them before he said, "What did she say?"

"She didn't tell me outright, but I… I understand how she feels."

Daniel studied her. "You lost a child?"

"Yes."

He breathed deep. "What's to be done?"

"Go to her. Be with her. Let her know you still love her. It's you she needs."

He stared for a moment then, without a word, strode toward

the cottage.

Elise watched until he disappeared into the darkness. A moment later, she heard the shuffle of boots on the porch. With the click of the cottage door, exhaustion washed over her. She took three steps to the closest tree and leaned against the trunk, resting her head. What a fool she was to have become too entangled with these people. They were no longer faceless strangers, but named friends whose lives had touched her. Friends she had deceived—Marcus most of all. She pushed from the tree and started down the path.

No guard remained to escort her home. The moon peeked from behind clouds. She welcomed the solitary walk. The moment the thought formed, tears rolled down her cheeks. Elise gave her head a hard shake but only succeeded in further blurring her vision. The moon dipped behind the clouds again and she was plunged into shadows. Her toe slammed against a rock. She lurched forward. She thrust her hands out in defense of the fall, but large hands seized her waist and yanked her against a hard body. Elise opened her mouth to scream but the arm tightened around her and the scream emerged a squeak.

"Re-release me you brute!" she wheezed, giving her assailant a hard kick to the leg.

He cursed softly. Her stomach did a somersault. *Marcus.*

"Brute, is it?" he murmured. A strained note in his voice said the kick had been successful. "You dare call me brute when I saved you from a nasty fall?"

Elise sagged against him. "You gave me a scare." She took a deep breath.

He ran a hand over her shoulder, following the caress with a kiss to her neck. "'Tis not nice for a lady to call her lover a brute." Another kiss followed on her shoulder.

"*Good Lord.*" She broke free and faced him, trying to discern his features in the darkness. When unsuccessful, she muttered, "You truly are a man."

He chuckled. "That doesn't please you?" Marcus took her hand and started down the path. "Never mind. It will soon enough."

They walked for a few moments, then he slipped an arm around her waist. A shock rippled through Elise, settling between her legs. This feeling she had to guard against. When she left—her heart wrenched and she became painfully aware of his arm around her. His warmth had seeped through her dress, comforting, offering the promise—Elise clamped down on the burgeoning desire. She wouldn't hurt him by giving herself to him then leaving. She had to keep him at a distance for just a little longer.

"You must be exhausted," he said.

She thought of Chloe. "I'm worried about Chloe."

"She'll be fine. Daniel loves her."

"Yes. Their love is their salvation."

"'Tis always the case," Marcus stated matter-of-factly.

Her heart leapt. "Oh?"

"Aye. The love between a man and a woman is salvation itself."

"Perhaps. However, they will be needing an extra dose now."

"You don't think Daniel loves her?"

"I believe he will do his best to comfort her," she replied.

"And who will comfort Daniel?"

"Chloe, of course. Who else?"

"Who else, indeed?" Marcus repeated softly, and this time she couldn't stop the flutter of her heart.

* * * *

When they entered the castle's kitchen, Marcus ordered Mary to prepare a hot bath for Elise. She protested, but he shook his head.

"I planned on going straight to bed," she complained, as he escorted her through the kitchen.

"Trust me." He forced her to keep pace with him as they crossed the great hall. "You will thank me in the morning." They neared the stairs and he prodded her up.

She remained silent until they reached her door. "Really—" she began.

"Go," he interrupted. "I'll return in a moment."

Elise sighed but acquiesced.

Marcus strode down the hallway to his room. He pushed past his bedchamber door and crossed to the sideboard in the far corner. He poured a brandy and drank it in one swallow. He grimaced, then poured another and went back to Elise's room. Pausing at her door, he knocked once then entered. She looked up sharply, one hand on the remaining boot she was in the process of removing.

"You might have waited until I gave you permission to enter," she said, giving him a reproachful look.

"Drink this." He handed her the brandy.

Elise set the boot on the floor, then took the glass. She sniffed and peered at him over the rim of the snifter. "Napoleon brandy." She drank it in nearly as quick a flourish as he had.

Marcus raised his brows. "Careful, lass. One should acquire a tolerance for spirits before gulping them."

"I wish you'd brought two. Mmm." She stood. "Makes me feel warm all over."

A knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," he called.

Elise frowned. "This is my bedchamber," she said, as the door opened and two men entered carrying the bathtub. "If you don't mind, I will be the one to allow visitors entrance." Her gaze shifted to the tub. She thrust the glass forward, bumping Marcus's chest. He grasped the snifter as she released it and stepped past him. "Over there," she instructed, "by the fire."

Two more men followed with pails of steaming water. "Mary said the rest of the water will take a little time to heat," one man said, as he dumped his pail into the tub.

Elise walked to the tub and peered into it. "Two pails of cool water will do."

The men nodded and were gone. She faced Marcus. He gave her a questioning look, knitting his brows as though not comprehending.

"*Marcus.*"

"Ah, yes." He set the glass on the nightstand, then came to stand beside her. He grasped her shoulders and spun her facing away from him.

"Wha—?"

He began unbuttoning the buttons down the back of her dress.

"Marcus!" She tried to twist free.

"Hold still," he commanded, holding fast to the dress, "or you'll rip the fabric."

Elise reached back, slapping at him, and hit the hard muscle of his hip. She instantly snatched her hand back. He regretted his lack of foresight in not standing closer. An inch or two more, and she might have managed a nice swat to his groin.

"Release me," she growled.

"Not unless you intend to bathe in your clothes." He tugged on the final button, leaving the dress open to her waist.

She grasped the back of her dress, whirling just in time to hide her back from the man who entered with the two pails of cold water she'd requested. She stepped out of his way as he hurried past her and Marcus to pour the water into the tub. He turned and left. The door clicked closed behind him. Elise faced Marcus. He grinned and leaned against the bedpost.

Her eyes narrowed. "Marcus MacGregor."

"I could wash your back—"

"Out!" She pointed to the door.

He sighed, straightening from the bedpost. He started for the door then halted, and faced her. "Mayhap another brandy? It would take me only—"

"Ohhh!" She lunged forward and shoved at his chest.

He took a faltering step back. "It would relax you, lass. Trust—"

Elise released her hold on the back of her dress and used both hands to push even harder. He stepped back several paces until he came up against the door.

"Surely you don't mean to keep all the warm water to yourself," he said.

She leaned into him. "You want to share the water?"

His body tensed. "I would gladly share your bathwater, love."

Elise shoved away from him. "Fine. I will have it sent to your room when I'm done."

Marcus entered the kitchen an hour later to find Mary sitting by the fire. "How is Elise?"

"I haven't heard a peep. Should I see to her?"

He shook his head. "I will go."

A few minutes later, Marcus opened Elise's door. He froze at the sight of her fast asleep in the tub. Mesmerized, he tried to throttle the dizzying current that raced through him. He had held her intimately. Yet those encounters had not prepared him for the sight of her naked. Earlier, he had teased her mercilessly, knowing full well she wouldn't give in. Now, she lay before him in all her womanly splendor, his for the taking.

In his mind's eye, he saw himself lift her from the water. Her eyes would flutter open to register first surprise, then desire. Desire streaked through him. A blush crept up her neck as he slid is gaze to her breasts. When he pressed her close, the moisture that clung to her skin dampened his shirt. Water dripped from her body and across the floor as he carried her to the bed. He laid her on the bed, coming down on top of her—Marcus jarred from the vision. The throb in his groin deepened and he couldn't halt his gaze from moving down Elise's body, past her breasts, along her stomach to the curls below. He closed his eyes. If he took her now, she might acquiesce but would later blame him, feeling he had taken advantage in a moment of weakness.

God help him, she would be right.

If he took a single step toward her, nothing could call him back.

Marcus whirled. Behind him, sweet victory whispered. Then laughed.

Chapter Ten

Elise awoke the following morning, the lingering warmth of Marcus's body from her dream state so real that she jolted awake upon reaching out and touching only cool sheets beside her. Sadness settled over her. There would be no mornings where they awoke together, no mornings where Marcus pulled her close and kissed her body before slipping inside her.

Tears stung her eyes. This time when she left, there would be no clues, no one to confess that she had gone with Peter McFie. She didn't blame Winnie. When confronted by her master, Winnie had told the truth. Elise expected nothing less. She had gambled and lost. She wouldn't lose a second time. Now, if she could only locate the secret passageway leading from the castle to the outside.

The mantel clock chimed softly. She looked at the clock. Nearly seven. Elise bolted upright. Marcus had likely already gone to the fields. She swung her legs over the side of the bed then paused before rising. He would be preoccupied with final preparations for the celebration starting that night. If she chose the moment with care, he might not overanalyze her request to go to Michael's.

A pang of guilt surfaced. Was the need to check for the notice in the *Sunday Times* worth manipulating him one last time? The question went beyond morality. When she reached Glasgow, if no ship left immediately for America, she might have to go to another port. London was the best choice. But if the notice was still in the paper could she risk it?

When Elise stepped from the postern door ten minutes later, she spotted Marcus at the front gate. He stood among a group of men, his horse's reins in hand. She hurried across the courtyard toward him. He turned as she neared. A smile spread across his face. When she came within arm's length, he surprised her by dropping the reins and sweeping her into his embrace, then twirling her about.

"Marcus," she breathed, "put me down."

He twirled again. The ground spun around her and she squealed, burying her face in his neck. Her cheek instantly warmed with the contact of his skin. Her breath quickened. Good Lord, she'd forgotten about his open shirt! He stopped and she looked up into his grinning face.

"What brings you here this fine morning?" he asked, still holding her off the ground.

"Put me down," she said. His grin widened, and Elise felt her cheeks flush even warmer. "People are watching."

"Lass," he said, imitating her secretive whisper, "we have no

secrets."

Elise glanced at the men who spoke amongst themselves as though she and Marcus weren't there.

"Have you come to wish me a good day?" he asked.

She looked back at him. "Of course."

"Then ye mean to leave me with one of your sweet kisses." He lowered her to the ground.

Her heart sped up.

Marcus's eyes darkened.

There was something warm and enchanting in his humor and, against her better sense, Elise wound an arm around his neck and pulled him to her. Their lips met. Marcus gave a gentle but firm thrust of his tongue against her mouth. She jerked, sure every man present knew of the intimacy, but Marcus held her another moment before breaking the embrace.

He nuzzled her neck. "You make me feel as though I err going into the fields today."

Elise pulled back and gazed up at him.

He smiled. "Surely my time would be better spent with ye in your bedchamber?"

She drew a sharp breath.

"Nay, sweet." She tried to break away, but he held her fast. "You don't kiss a man thusly and expect him no' to want more."

Elise dropped her gaze to his chest. Warmth flooded her midsection at sight of the tan chest visible through his open shirt. She had sped past embarrassment into idiocy. Michael MacGregor and the *Sunday Times* be damned, she should have stayed in bed.

"It was just a simple kiss," she said.

His masculine laugh rippled through the air. "I would say then that gives me much to look forward to."

She jerked her head up.

Marcus released her. "I had better go." He gave her a roguish wink. "Or I won't be going at all."

"Wait," she said. "I have a request."

"A request?" He turned to test the cinch on his mount's saddle.

"Michael hasn't arrived at Brahan Seer as Erin said he would. Lammas begins tonight, and he promised to be here yesterday. I would like to make a quick visit to see if he is well."

Marcus turned his gaze on her.

"I know there is a lot to do," she added hurriedly. "But I would only go there and back."

"Lass—"

"You can send someone with me. I don't mind."

"'Tis best—"

"You cannot deny me. It isn't right—"

Marcus grabbed her and she yelped as he clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Hush," he said. Eyeing her suspiciously, he loosened his hold, then removed his hand from her mouth altogether. "I will send Erin to fetch his father."

"And if Michael isn't feeling well?"

"I will send someone along with Erin. If Michael is unwell, the man can fetch someone to tend him. Erin will accompany me this morning. I'll send him to his father's this afternoon. They will be back in time for the festivities."

Her heart sank. "I wanted to see for myself that he is well."

"If he feels too poorly to make the trip, he'll need a more experienced doctor."

She scowled. "You think yourself clever, Marcus MacGregor." His mouth twitched and she gave him a dry look. "All right." Before realizing her own intent, she gave him a quick kiss on the jaw.

Surprise flashed in his eyes.

Elise backed away. "I have work to do." She whirled and hurried toward the castle.

* * * *

A hard day's work hadn't dampened Marcus's anticipation. He spotted Elise standing on the far side of the courtyard, winding her way through the throng gathered in honor of Lammas. Her hair, piled atop her head, left the soft contours of her shoulders bare. With his gaze, he traced the low-cut bodice of the olive green gown that hinted at the tender, creamy flesh of her breasts. She had adorned herself with MacGregor colors—his colors. A red and green sash of *plaide* crossed one shoulder and fastened at her waist. She paused in the crowd to speak to one person, then another.

Musicians struck up, fiddle and bagpipe leading the music, and the crowd cleared the center of the courtyard for those who joined in dance. Brian MacGregor swept Elise into the barn dance being played. She threw her head back, her delight in her companion obvious. Marcus waited a few turns, then caught them as they neared.

"You can't keep the lady to yourself, Brian," he said.

"Laird," Brian replied, and released his hold on Elise.

Marcus pulled her close. The music ended. He remained motionless, his gaze holding hers until the band began *The Scottish*. He realized the quickening of her breath in the rise and fall of her breasts as he swung her to the right in unison with other dancers.

Her gaze broke from his, her lashes dropping demurely. A

tremor passed through him. Was she toying with him? Her fingers tightened on his shoulder as he executed a quick turn. Elise leaned into him, her hair brushing his jaw. She tipped her head up slightly. He felt her breath against his neck. A tiny smile lifted one corner of her mouth, then her brow puckered.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Nay, love."

"You seem deep in thought."

Marcus dodged another couple who strayed perilously close, then looked down at her. "I was thinking how I would like to take you from here and ravish your sweet body until you cry 'enough!'" Her mouth parted in a tiny gasp and he went on. "Then I would slowly and methodically make love to every inch of your body until you lie exhausted beneath me."

She stumbled. If not for his tight grasp, she would have fallen. Delighted, he pulled her closer. "I see the idea appeals to you."

Her gaze dropped. When she brought her eyes back to bear on him, she looked at him through her lashes, a shy expression on her face. "I can only wonder, sir, if you have the strength to fulfill such outlandish claims."

Deviltry played in her eyes, and Marcus felt his body harden at seeing more than a little curiosity mixed in the bargain. "Aye." He pressed her more intimately against him. "I have the strength."

Her intake of breath told him she felt his arousal.

"Do you not agree?" he asked.

She remained silent for a moment. The noise of the crowd filled the air, the music winding between the spaces as if for them alone.

Her eyes darkened, and she said, "It occurs to me, milord, that if you fulfilled such a promise, logic dictates it would be *you* who lay exhausted on top of me."

"Indeed?" he said with the raise of an amused brow.

He whirled her into the final spin of the dance before the music ended. The dance crowd dispersed and new couples assembled as the music began again. They stood, still in each other's arms. She moved to step away, but he held her fast. She gave him a quizzical look.

"Come, take a walk with me, love," he said.

The dancers began dancing around them.

Elise shook her head. "You can't abandon your guests, and I promised Winnie I would help with the food." She pushed his arms from her and backed away.

A couple danced between them. He saw the bemused look the woman gave Elise and realized she had seen it too. She was clear of the dancers now.

"I had better go see if any help is needed in the kitchen," she

shouted above the music.

Marcus watched her turn and hurry away. So, the little minx had ventured a dip in the waters only to yank her foot back when it had been nibbled. Perhaps next time he would simply yank her in.

* * * *

Marcus hadn't considered the possibility that Elise would wish to accompany the women the following day on the yearly tradition of swimming in the cool waters of Loch Katrine. Now, the procession had started and, per his order, his guards had stopped her from passing beyond the gates. He grimaced at seeing her agitated pacing as he approached. She stopped and glared at him.

"Do you mean to keep me here while the other women go to the loch?" Her narrowed eyes dared him answer *yes*.

"John," he called to the nearest guard, "fetch another man and the two of you accompany the women to the loch."

John's eyes widened. He cast a quick glance at Elise, then jerked his attention back to Marcus.

Marcus gave him a dry look. "You are to watch for trouble, John, not the lasses."

Marcus looked back at Elise and stifled a laugh at the tight-lipped look on her face. Apparently she didn't care for being singled out with an escort. Imagine how she would feel when he came for her in a short while. The most important part of the tradition was allowing the women enough time to discard their dresses and frolic in the water. The men later followed to engage them in a sporting game of chase.

Elise abruptly whirled and strode through the gates down the path.

"Hurry, lad," Marcus urged. "She's getting away."

John called to a man on the wall, then hurried through the gates after her.

Marcus turned his attention to Elise's retreating back. "Any antics, lass, and I'll turn you over my knee."

She didn't acknowledge the threat, but he knew she'd heard him. His first wife, Jenna, hadn't been predisposed to clan traditions and never participated in the game. This year, he had reason to participate. Elise disappeared from view down the path. She didn't understand the game. She soon would.

Twenty minutes later, unable to resist the idea of Elise's scantily clad body gliding through the water, Marcus emerged from the trees at the bottom of the mountainside. He hurried across the twenty-foot clearing where he ducked behind one of the larger patches of juniper

bushes lining the jagged shoreline.

Peering through the foliage and across the rocky shore, he witnessed the exact scene he had imagined. Elise, stripped to her chemise, dove into the blue waters of Loch Katrine along with the other giggling women. The thin cotton chemise she wore the night he accosted her in his library revealed far more than the heavy flannel the women wore in the interest of modesty during this adventure, but he envisioned the revealing shadows he knew would be visible through the wet material. A giddy anticipation settled in his stomach. She would, at first, be furious. With gentle persuasion, however…

Marcus emerged from his hiding place and strode to the shore's edge. The women splashed one another, the recipients shrieking when their companions' aim found a mark. A woman squealed. He had been spotted. Elise looked his way. Just as he thought, the surprise on her face said she hadn't been informed of this part of the game. He suspected that, if she knew the real reason behind the yearly ritual, she would have declined participation. She insisted on being a part of Brahan Seer; logic dictated that she receive full measure.

Eyes steady on her, Marcus stripped off his boots. He stepped into the loch, his shins, then thighs, slicing through the water as he ventured deeper. The women blazed a path for him, shrieking with delight while Elise remained frozen.

"You had better move, lass," one woman called. "He's coming for ye, and if he catches you…" Peals of laughter followed.

Elise's eyes abruptly shifted and she scanned her surroundings before returning to him. Marcus smiled. Her eyes narrowed, then she dove into the water. He halted, waiting for her to resurface. Seconds ticked by and she didn't reappear. He scanned the water. A sudden round of triumphant shouts went up from the women and he whirled to see Elise rising from the water some thirty feet behind him. She started for the shore, her progress labored through the hip-deep water. By God, he would have to put his back into it to catch her before she reached her clothes! She glanced back, throwing him a satisfied smirk.

Oh ho! She may not have known the game, but she caught on fast. Marcus dove into the water, his strong strokes speeding him through the deeper water until he reached knee deep. He rose, the water no longer a hindrance to his fast pumping legs. His feet pounded onto the shore and, with a burst of energy, he closed the gap between them. In a final sprint, he dove for her, his arms encircling her waist as he brought her to the ground.

Elise sputtered and he realized she had gotten a mouthful of sandy dirt.

"Oh!" she spat. "Let me go!"

Marcus allowed her to thrash in his grasp until she had twisted

into a prone position facing him. He settled his weight on her. She beat at his chest. He chuckled and hugged her closer, trapping her arms between them.

"Let me go!" she howled, kicking her heels on the ground like a spoiled child.

Marcus tried looking innocent but knew he failed miserably. "Nay."

"What in God's name are you doing? Why have you attacked me? This is an outrage!" Her voice rose as she twisted in a serious effort to dislodge him.

"Now, why do you say that, love? I am only playing with you."

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind. Her eyes narrowed to slits. "One does not attack a defenseless woman."

"Lass, I think you are anything but defenseless. Although, I am enjoying myself at your expense." Marcus bent his head to whisper in her ear, "The women didn't explain the game."

He went on to explain how, each year, the women came to the loch, and their men later followed. Those with wives sought them out, some in sport, some with the intentions of a child arriving nine months later. Those wanting to make a woman their wife came with the hope that the love play would lead to the consummation of a betrothal. When Marcus finished, a blush had made its way from Elise's cheek to the delicate ear he'd been whispering into.

"*No*," she said, her eyes wide.

Marcus grinned. "Aye."

She looked past him and he glanced over his shoulder to find several women regarding them with interest.

"I would like to get up now," Elise said.

He looked back at her. "Aye." He came to his knees. Before she could rise, he slid his arms beneath her, cupping her to his chest.

She gave him an impatient shove as he rose. "Set me down."

Marcus assumed a thoughtful expression. "Nay. I have won and deserve my reward."

Elise lifted a brow. "Just what reward would that be, sir?"

He grinned. Aye, she had learned the game. He stepped behind the cover of the bushes he had occupied earlier and paused, uncertain what he wanted to do with her. Marcus laughed inwardly. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with her. He simply hadn't decided how to go about it. One thing he did know, however, he was enjoying the feel of her wet chemise against him far too much to release her just yet.

He kissed her. She pushed against his chest and Marcus realized she wasn't about to let him make love to her in plain sight of the other women. He laid her on the ground and came down upon her, gently

this time. He tugged her chemise high enough to free her legs and settle between them. Her grip on his shoulders tightened. He kissed her again. Hard. She tensed.

"Shh," he soothed. "Let me please you."

He slid a moist kiss down her cheek, then along her neck. "Just a little love play," he whispered.

He didn't intend on taking her there, tumbling her like a serving wench, but please her, he would. Slowly, he smoothed a hand along her outer thigh. Grasping her chemise, he bunched it until his fingers touched the soft flesh beneath. Elise turned her head, her cheek against his, and placed a kiss on his jaw. Marcus breathed deep.

He slipped his hand beneath her and cupped her buttocks. "I swear to only please you this time."

"We aren't—" She gasped as he lifted her buttocks, meeting her flesh with a gentle rotation of his shaft against her sex.

Her breath came quicker. He caressed her buttocks, her hip. A distant pounding of hooves stabbed through the cloud of desire. He paused, his hand on her pelvis. Again, a distant sound—a roll of thunder? He lifted his head. In a flash, the memory of the dream he'd had while at Declan's washed over him.

Elise's grip on his shoulder tightened. "What is it?"

Shrieks sounded.

The women.

Marcus shoved to his knees. He peered through the bushes. Riding like hell hounds toward them were seven Campbell warriors.

Seven, his mind repeated calmly, *not an army like that in his dream. Only seven.*

He leapt to his feet.

"Who are they?" Elise called.

His hand shot to his side. Bloody hell, he'd left his sword at the keep. *Foolish mistake*. Marcus swung his gaze to the two warriors sent to guard the women. He made out the red of their *plaide* behind bushes thirty feet down shore. He glanced up the mountainside at Brahan Seer. Why were no warriors charging down the hill? They must have seen the riders.

Elise scrambled to her feet and Marcus whirled. He shoved her to the ground. "Do not move!" He turned back to watch the Campbells approach.

The women shrieked. Those on the shore raced for the water, joining their comrades who had taken to deeper waters.

"Marcus!" Elise cried.

He looked to see her standing, then glanced at the oncoming men. His heart thumped wildly. *Had they seen her?* Marcus grabbed her wrist, yanking her back to the ground.

"Nell," she said, struggling to rise and pointing to the right of their hiding place.

Marcus looked. There, sleeping soundly on the shore, lay Nell, a young maid who had only last week begun working in the castle. Despite the ruckus, she didn't stir. Marcus recalled that she was deaf in one ear. His heart leapt into his throat.

"Do not move," he ground out, and turned back to peer through the bush.

The other women had swum safely to deeper waters. Someone cried out Nell's name, but the girl didn't wake. Marcus looked at the Campbells. Two of the seven comrades reached the women's clothes and halted. More shrieks came from the women as they swam farther from shore. The two Campbells scanned the frantic women but made no move to pursue them.

One of the Campbells said something indistinguishable. Marcus strained to make out the other's response but without success. They continued to scrutinize the women, their attention moving farther to the right where Nell lay. They would see her in an instant. Marcus stood and stepped around the bush into full sight. He took two paces in the direction of his warriors' hiding place.

"Look!" one of the Campbells shouted, and the other turned in Marcus's direction.

Marcus spied a large piece of driftwood. He hurried the few paces to the wood and snatched it up. He kept his gaze on the Campbell who had called out as he snapped off two small branches and dropped them. Four of the five remaining Campbells joined their companions.

"Ha!" one of the newcomers exclaimed. "The MacGregor thinks to bring us down with a stick of wood."

The man unsheathed his sword and kicked his horse's belly. The beast lunged forward. The man bore down upon Marcus and swung his sword. Marcus deflected the blow with the driftwood as the horse shot past, and pivoted full circle, hitting the man across the back with the wood. A loud crack sounded and the man fell to the ground limp. Two more Campbells spurred their horses toward him.

He sprang forward, headed for the fallen Campbell's sword. He reached the weapon with a dive, barely missing the sweep of an oncoming rider's sword. The Campbell barreled past while his companion wheeled his horse hard right to intercept. The Campbells nearest the shore shouted and two more of them shot toward Marcus.

Marcus sprang to his feet, his steel meeting that of the man who had cut him off. Marcus faltered a step under the power of his opponent's swing. The man parried left, smiling as though already tasting victory. Marcus saw the man's fingers tighten around his

mount's reins and, just as the horse turned, Marcus thrust his sword into his midsection. He twisted the weapon, then yanked it free.

The man cried out. He clutched his belly and slumped forward in the saddle. Blood gushed despite the arm he wrapped around himself. Marcus leapt forward and grabbed his shoulder. The Campbell swatted at him, his blood-soaked arm leaving a streak of blood down his arm, but Marcus's fingers found purchase, and he yanked him from the saddle.

Marcus grabbed the pummel and pulled himself into the saddle in time to see his two men close in on the Campbell warrior who had shot past him. The man gave a violent slap of reins against his steed's rump in an effort to elude them. John lunged forward, swinging the blunt side of his sword across the horse's knee. The horse stumbled, then fell to his knees, throwing its rider. Marcus wheeled his mount around to face the two Campbells who were nearly upon him when the thunder of hooves rolled down the mountainside. He cut his gaze to the left and saw a dozen MacGregor warriors speeding downhill.

A woman cried out, then Elise shouted, "Marcus! They have Nell!"

He jerked his attention to the girl. His gut wrenched when one Campbell rounded his attention on Elise and stared. Marcus yanked his horse's reins to the right. The animal whirled and Marcus dug his heels into its flanks. In four great strides, he met his opponent's sword with his own. The Campbell pulled his mount hard left. Marcus gave his horse a fierce kick. The horse charged and he thrust his sword into the Campbell's side even as the man's gaze met his.

The man's eyes bulged. He reached out as if to grab Marcus. Marcus yanked his sword from the man's body. The man's mouth worked. Marcus whirled his horse toward the warrior who had captured Nell. The guards from Brahan Seer flew across the shore in his path, Erin in the lead.

"Erin!" Marcus shouted, then to one of the other men, "You!" Both men broke from their party and spun toward him. "Take her back to the keep." He jabbed his sword in Elise's direction. "Erin, you're with me."

In an instant, the warrior reached Elise. She shook her head.

"Take her!" Marcus ordered, and slapped the reins across his horse's rump.

He drove his mount, staying a nose ahead of Erin. Nell's heels unexpectedly kicked the belly of the Campbell's horse.

Fight, lass, fight! Marcus urged.

The Campbell's fisted hand rose and he tensed. The fist fell hard and Nell went limp. Marcus's blood froze.

The ground softened as the shores of Loch Katrine changed

from rocky sand to marsh. Marcus smiled coldly. One had to know the land well to ride this section of the shore, which the Campbell warrior did not. The man's horse faltered. He glanced over his shoulder, then flung Nell to the ground. Erin cried out. An even darker rage shot through Marcus.

They reached Nell.

"Take her home!" Marcus shouted without stopping.

The Campbell's horse stumbled again, then crashed to the ground, pinning his rider's leg beneath him. The animal struggled to rise, gave a shrill whinny, then heaved his full weight onto the man's leg. The Campbell arched in pain. After an instant's heavy breathing, he craned his head in Marcus's direction. Marcus lifted his sword. In ten seconds, the warrior would be his. The man shoved frantically at the horse's back, his gaze glued on Marcus.

Marcus tightened his grip on the sword. The man's gaze shifted to the raised weapon. He leveraged a foot on the horse's back, pushing with all his might. Marcus discerned strain in his arm muscles as, with one great heave, the man slid his leg from beneath the horse.

The warrior scrambled to his knees, lunging for his sword as Marcus raised his weapon and cried, *"Buadhaich!"* With one mighty swing of the claymore, Marcus sliced across the man's neck.

Marcus wheeled his horse around and, his gaze straight ahead, tread over the body as he raced toward home.

Chapter Eleven

Marcus closed the door of his library with a deceptively soft click and raked his gaze across the men standing in tense silence. "We have a traitor. When I discover who that man is—" His glare halted on his father, who sat in the chair nearest the hearth. Marcus caught the glitter of Cameron's eyes in the firelight before swinging his attention to Daniel. "You have made the changes in security?"

"Aye, laird," Daniel said, his mouth grim.

"Marcus," his father began.

"Aye?" Marcus took two paces and halted abruptly beside his desk.

Cameron sighed.

"The attack took place during the mid-afternoon change of guard." Marcus's words shook with the rage of self-reproach. "I should have realized—bloody hell, my thoughts were on what awaited me at the loch, just like those men who were hurrying from their duty at the wall. 'Tis true," he said, the reproach turned to bitterness, "logic bows to a man's cock."

He had always been prepared. The men who guarded the walls monitored the village to the east, the loch to the west, and the valley that stretched for miles to the south. The weight of guilt bore down in greater measure. His people depended upon him. Yet the enemy found a crack in his defenses. A shudder ran through him. Nell had very nearly been a casualty of his carelessness. Had Katie's life been forfeit because of such negligence? Aye, she still lived, her heart beat, she breathed, but her mind had ceased to work. Her spirit lay hidden in some dark corner of her being. He had failed her, as he had nearly failed—

Marcus slammed his fist down on the desk. "Who informed the Campbells of the routine? They attacked our women before our very eyes. Why such a bold move?"

Cameron answered in a low voice, "It doesn't seem strange to ye, lad, that we've had Campbells on our land three times in as many months?"

Marcus's mouth hardened. "Aye. But why?"

"Mayhap the why and who are the same?"

Marcus stilled. "What do you mean?"

They stared at one another for a moment before Cameron said to the men, "Lads, leave me with my son."

The men filed out, the last closing the door behind him.

Cameron looked at Marcus. "You mean to say you don't know?" Marcus only looked at him and his father went on, "You know well

enough the trouble began with Elise."

"Aye, they are using her—"

"You are sure it's them using her?"

Marcus started. A surge of anger rammed through him, the first genuine hostility he'd ever felt for his father. "Bloody hell, Cameron, you're saying Elise is in league with the Campbells. They nearly killed her."

"Nay," Cameron replied. "In fact, the lass returned in remarkably good shape."

"The tracks I saw say otherwise."

"You are a fine tracker, but you are no master. You should have had Johnson—"

"I did take Johnson, if you recall," Marcus interrupted.

"But he did not see the tracks you interpreted as her capture."

"I made no mistake in my interpretation. What has happened? You were in favor of my having her."

"Aye," Cameron said. "And I like her. But that does not change the fact she is the most likely suspect."

Elise's expression when he sent John with her to the loch came to mind. She had been angry. Any woman would be angry. He had nearly imprisoned her—and why?

"She lived here four months before I arrived with no such trouble," Marcus insisted.

"Mayhap the Campbells intended you to want her so they could use her against you."

Marcus laughed harshly. "The woman who escaped the Campbells was no collaborator. Nay, Cameron, you have no grounds for suspicion."

"How long have they hated us?" his father demanded with more vehemence than he'd heard in his voice since before his mother's death.

Blood lust shot through Marcus. "I will kill every last one of them."

"Aye. And condemn more men to die. What of their wives—their children?"

"We have dealt with them for years—centuries," Marcus snapped.

Cameron grunted. "King George is likely to tire completely of the fight and finance the MacGregor's annihilation."

Though King George had remained quiet, Marcus knew the king forbade any Campbell reprisal after Marcus attacked Assipatle in retaliation for Katie MacGregor's rape. His intervention had saved many lives. But the sovereign's mood swung between reality and fantasy, his mind controlled by liquor and the laudanum he kept ready

at his bedside. Where his loyalties would lie tomorrow was anyone's guess.

"If he takes that course of action, he'll regret it as long as I draw breath," Marcus bit back.

Cameron slumped against the chair cushion. "I dinna' want to bury my only son." He looked directly into Marcus's eyes. "You have a son. What will be his legacy?"

"By God, Cameron, you would have me believe Elise is a spy and, in the same breath, demand I change the course of the raging river that is the Campbells." He strode to the door. "I will keep you apprised of my progress in discovering our traitor's identity." He yanked open the door. "Rest assured, when I find the guilty party—no matter who they are—there will be no place for them on this earth, save the grave."

Minutes later, Marcus entered the kitchen and scanned the busy room. "Winnie, where's Elise?"

Winnie turned from the counter, tray in hand, and handed it to a girl waiting nearby. "With Nell."

"Nell?" he demanded in a voice which quieted the bustle in the kitchen.

"Aye."

"Elise dared leave the keep after today—and especially at night?"

"So far as I know, she did not step foot outside the walls. I settled Nell in my cottage. With her mother dead and her aunt run off to wed, Elise offered to sit with her." He winced when Winnie added, "I feared leaving her alone." Winnie grasped a pitcher of water sitting on the cabinet. "Back to work," she ordered the women, shoving the pitcher toward a girl who took it and scurried toward the great hall. Winnie focused again on him.

"Elise will not be here for the evening meal then?" he asked.

"I sent their meals to my cottage."

Marcus gave a curt nod, then strode past the women and out the back door.

When he arrived at the cottage, he knocked lightly. Hearing no answer, he pushed the door open to find food sitting on the table untouched and both women missing. Marcus hurried back to the castle. He looked in Elise's room. His heart rate kicked up at finding it empty. He went next to the ladies' drawing room, but even as he opened the door he sensed the silence.

Dread coiled tight in his gut at sight of the empty room. If she wasn't inside the keep and she hadn't attempted to pass through the gates, only one answer remained: she had left through the passageway leading from the dungeons. Why go to such lengths to leave unseen?

His father's words earlier returned, *"…she is the most likely suspect."* He remembered her agitation when he sent John with her. She couldn't be the traitor, it simply wasn't possible. *Why,* his mind asked? *Because you love her?*

"Yes," he snarled, and slammed the door.

She could be in his library. But even the warmth that wafted out to meet him as he opened the library door didn't dispel the deadly silence. He looked at the chair his father had occupied earlier—the chair he had discovered Elise curled up in on many occasions. *"Mayhap the why and the who are the same*," his father had said.

Marcus shook himself from the vise which gripped him, then closed the door on the vacant room. He considered employing more men in the search. Nay. If he found evidence of her culpability, he would deal with her before he could change his mind. He strode down the corridor, continuing through the castle until reaching the last sconce burning in that wing of the castle. He disengaged the light from the wall, then took the final steps to the staircase leading into the bowels of Brahan Seer.

Narrow step after narrow step, Marcus wound his way down to what, during his grandfather's rule, had been dungeons where he incarcerated criminals such as the one who betrayed them that afternoon. He paused in the long corridor before one of the cells and gave the door a shove. With a grinding creak, the heavy iron swung open. The sconce's flame jumped as if gasping for breath.

Marcus settled his gaze on the iron shackles hanging on the far wall in open defiance of time's passage. How would a woman survive chained in those irons? If Elise braved these dungeons, had even a tremor passed through her when she hurried by these rooms of torture? What sort of woman entered such a place?

A woman with something to hide.

He hurried past the cell to the next right turn, stopping at the sudden dead end. Squatting, Marcus lowered the sconce and slowly edged the light forward in order to examine the stone floor and discerned a single set of boot prints beneath the thin layer of dust. His heart pounded against his chest. He jerked the sconce up, searching the wall for the hairline crack recognizable only to one who knew it existed. He found the seam and depressed the spot. The panel sprang open with a squeal.

Marcus rose and stepped inside the passageway. Sconce low, he proceeded slowly, inspecting the packed dirt floor until he reached the end of the passageway. He faced left where lay the concealed door which opened to the outside and pushed against the door. The stone slid noiselessly open and he stepped into the night.

Ten minutes later, Marcus entered the kitchen again. "Elise is

not to be found." He stopped before Winnie.

"Surely ye aren't worried," she said, but Marcus had caught the flicker of surprise in her expression.

"Who took the meal to them?"

"Bartholomew."

He started for the door.

"By now he's on duty at the wall," she called as he disappeared into the darkness.

Moments later, Marcus mounted the battlement stairs and found Bartholomew standing guard on the west corner of the wall. The guard straightened at his approach.

"You delivered the food to the women in Winnie's cottage?" Marcus demanded.

"Aye, laird."

"Were the women in the cottage when you arrived?"

Bartholomew shook his head.

Marcus narrowed his eyes. "And you thought nothing of it?"

He swallowed. "I didn't know I should."

Marcus hesitated, then turned and hurried along the battlements and down the stairs. He returned to Winnie's cottage but found nothing changed.

This time, when he entered the kitchen, Winnie halted the task of pulling scones from their baking pan and watched his approach.

He stopped beside the table. "They weren't in the cottage when Bartholomew delivered the meal."

Her gaze moved past him.

"What's wrong?" came Elise's voice at his back.

He pivoted to face her. Nell stood alongside her. "Where the blazes have you been?"

Elise's brow snapped into a frown.

"Well?"

"We were on the hill, near the storehouse," she replied.

Marcus looked at Nell.

"Aye, laird, we—" she looked at Elise.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"We were star gazing," Elise said in a reprimand.

He glanced at her, then looked back at Nell. "You two have been together all evening?"

"Aye," she said, obviously confused.

"By God," he muttered, and advanced toward them. Elise blinked and Nell retreated a pace, but he continued forward. When within reach of them, he grabbed Elise's wrist and started toward the great hall. Several men stared from the doorway.

"Be about your business," he ordered.

The men scattered in a hurried scuffle as he pulled Elise through the doorway and into the noisy hall. The din quieted slightly, men parting as he strode to the stairway.

"Marcus, what—"

"Hush," he commanded without looking back at her.

She didn't balk until they reached the door to her bedchamber. There, she yanked her hand free of his grasp.

He whirled on her. "Where were you?"

"I told you."

"I searched all of Brahan Seer."

"Clearly not all, or you would have found us. Ridiculous," she added in a mutter. "You act as if we need worry while inside the keep."

"Worry?" he repeated. "The Campbells meant harm, Elise. Did you think I would let them touch you?"

Her brow furrowed. He discerned the quick lift and fall of her breasts, the surprise—uncertainty perhaps? His body tightened. He realized the desire to take her with quick and hard actions.

"No," she replied.

He jarred from the erotic picture of her against the wall, him pressed between her legs. "Seeing you"—she faltered—"seeing them…" She shook her head, ending with a quiet, "It was strange."

"The Highlands are far more violent than Boston," he shot back.

She hesitated and his blood chilled when he realized it wasn't the violence of the Highlands that had startled her, but the violence in him. He felt anew the cut of his sword through Campbell flesh. He tensed, this time in fury.

"God damn bastards," he whispered, "they knew exactly what they were doing."

"What do you mean?"

He watched her carefully. "They knew when to attack—were aware of our weakness."

"Weakness?"

"Their attack coincided with the change of guard."

A tiny pause, then she said, "But that would mean—" She gasped. "That's not possible."

"Aye, 'tis not only possible, but true."

She shook her head vehemently. "I don't believe it."

The swirl of her hair, the tight-lipped determination, cut Marcus to the quick and he suddenly wished for nothing more than to hold her, to feel her heart beat against his chest as she slept in his arms. She fastened her gaze on him and he registered the lines of strain around her eyes.

"To bed," he said, and opened her bedchamber door. "And don't

leave your room again this night."

She started to protest, but he shoved her inside and closed the door behind her. Marcus still gripped the handle. God damn it, he'd allowed his father's suspicions to poison his thoughts. Elise had been with Nell all evening. She wasn't the traitor… unless she had made those boot prints in the dungeon some time before tonight.

* * * *

The following afternoon, Marcus entered his library to find Elise sitting in the chair before a low burning fire, looking just as he prayed he'd find her the night before. She jumped, the book she was clearly not reading sliding from her lap to the carpet.

He closed the door behind him. "You are the most unpredictable creature."

She bent to retrieve the book. "What have I done now?" She placed the book beside her on the chair.

Marcus walked to her and squatted beside the chair. He ran a finger down her arm. "Nothing, love. I'm preparing to leave for London and my mind is elsewhere." He smiled slightly. "It is my own shortcomings that plague me today. Not you."

Elise frowned. "Your shortcomings?"

He rose and strode to the sideboard "Never mind." He poured a drink. "It doesn't concern you."

A pause followed, then she said, "I think it does."

At her clipped tone, he looked over his shoulder. Her lips were pursed. Despite his mood, he smiled ruefully.

"I am no fool, Marcus MacGregor," she said.

He raised a brow.

"What shortcomings?" she demanded.

Marcus remained silent.

She shrugged. "I can easily find out."

He turned, leaving his drink untouched, and leaned against the sideboard. "How do you propose to do that?"

Elise slid him a sidelong glance. "Milord, do you think you are the only one with powers of persuasion?"

The sensual lift of her mouth startled him. He couldn't believe it. Was the little minx threatening to use her charms against him? A thrill reverberated deep within him. Lounging against the chair, she tipped her head back. His excitement grew as, closing her eyes, she reached back to tousle her hair. The locks cascaded in silken layers about her shoulders. Her fingers slid from her hair and along her throat. His body tightened when her fingertips skimmed the valley between her breasts. Her palms flattened across her belly, smoothing

her dress, and finally came to rest in her lap. She toyed with him—but he wanted her. He commanded his gaze to break from the sultry picture, but his mind refused to comply.

Elise patted the tiny space on the seat beside her. "Come sit with me, milord."

Her use of "milord" tantalized him, despite the knowledge she used the title only when angry or mocking him. "Nay, lass. I think not."

"Afraid?" She gave a low laugh.

Confound the woman! She hadn't even bothered to open her eyes when addressing him.

"Not afraid, love," he replied. "Cautious."

"Ah, I see."

Aye, he was sure she did.

She stretched her legs in one fluid motion. She opened her eyes and, leaning forward, shook out her skirt, a flash of white chemise showing before the fabric settled about her. She rose and glided over to him.

"If you're not in the mood," she tugged the collar on his shirt, "we can discuss this later."

She smoothed his shirt with the same maddening slowness she had used when straightening her dress. When her fingers tucked his shirt into the waistband of his kilt, he yanked her to him.

"You're playing with fire," he said.

She gazed up at him. "Am I?"

He bent to kiss her, but she dodged his mouth. He lifted a questioning brow and she met his gaze.

"You won't sit with me yet have no qualms about accosting me? Are you not tired?' she asked abruptly.

"Nay."

"Good. Then we shall talk."

Extricating herself from his hold, she wrapped a hand around his forearm and led him to the couch. Elise directed him down onto a cushion, then knelt on the cushion beside him.

"You are much too tense." She turned his back toward her.

With great care, she massaged the hard muscle of his shoulder. Marcus felt himself relax. He closed his eyes, contemplating ways to entice her hands lower. He became aware of her breath on his neck. He throbbed, anticipating her quick intake of breath when her gaze fell upon the noticeable lift of his kilt. She shifted and her breath came hot in his ear. Marcus shuddered as her lips brushed his ear.

"It wasn't your fault, you know."

His eyes flashed open and he twisted to face her. "I will not discuss this with you."

She shrugged, then nearly bounced into a sitting position beside him. "That doesn't change the fact I'm right."

"You know nothing of it," he snapped.

"I know enough."

Marcus faced her. Words poured from his mouth even as he blushed at defending his actions to a woman—especially this woman. "It is my responsibility to see that no harm comes to any here. I nearly failed."

"But you didn't."

The flat response brought him up short.

She shook her head as if speaking to a child. "You found a flaw in your defenses. Do you think it's the only one?"

Fear rushed through him. He hadn't considered there could be a single flaw, much less two, three or…

Elise took his hand in hers. "You aren't God. Close, perhaps," she gave a faint smile, "but still human. I understand how difficult this is, but you must accept the fact that, like most mortals, you are flawed." She paused. "Those attackers will never harm another person, and you learned a valuable lesson. Most would count themselves fortunate. Don't look so sullen. I am sure you will find a way to assuage your anger."

Marcus blinked, then grasped her shoulders and tugged her across his thighs. He pressed his lips to her ear and murmured, "What am I to do with you?"

Elise lifted a brow, saying, "Certainly not what you think," and gingerly shifted in his lap.

* * * *

Marcus looked past his father and the other people crowding the courtyard until his gaze fixed upon Elise. She stood with a group of women, rifling through a basket of provisions they were distributing to the men who were to accompany him to London.

Cameron clasped his shoulder. "All will be well." He glanced meaningfully at Elise, his hand dropping back to his side.

Marcus focused on his father. "She isn't to leave Brahan Seer while I am away."

"Aye."

"If Loudoun doesn't agree to intervene with his clansmen, I will seek an audience with King George."

Cameron nodded. "The earl willna' relish the possibility of losing his property to one of our attacks. Castle Kalchurn is his pride and joy."

"I plan on using that fact," Marcus replied. He nodded toward

Elise. "I had better say my good-byes."

Marcus strode to Elise. The warrior she handed a small cloth package to grasped it and murmured thanks before joining his nearby comrades. She turned, taking a surprised step back when she nearly collided with Marcus.

"You will honor your promise?" he asked.

"I won't leave Brahan Seer."

She couldn't leave. He had seen to that. The passageway had been boarded shut and the guards had orders not to let her pass. Marcus drew her to him. His heart pounded with every halting step closer she allowed until he could wrap his arm around her. Marcus cupped her neck in his free hand. Her gaze flitted to the side, but he cared nothing for the crowd. He kissed her. The familiar hunger lashed out. Had she any understanding of his need for her? She had called it lust. By God, he did lust after her.

Marcus took a long draught of her. When he returned, he would have set in motion what he should have done a month ago: discover her identity. He released her and motioned to the man who stood near the gate holding his horse's reins. The man pushed through the crowd and stopped beside him, reins extended. Marcus mounted, then paused, locking gazes with Elise.

"Elise."

She waited.

"I will return."

It seemed she didn't breathe.

"Be ready when I do."

* * * *

Three days away from Brahan Seer—from Elise—had taken a toll. Marcus looked up from the letter he was reading to the grandfather clock in the far corner of the study in his London home. He curbed a growing irritation. He'd been forced to follow the Earl of Loudoun to London, and now that Marcus awaited his arrival, the fool had the temerity to be late. Marcus finished the drink sitting before him, then returned his attention to the note sent to him by Margaret's father, Lord Ross.

Marcus, the note began, *I was unexpectedly called to London and have just learned of your arrival two days ago.* He gave a low laugh. "You hate London nearly as much as I do. What story did Margaret concoct to coerce you into accompanying her?" Marcus continued reading the note. *Lady Ross is giving a ball tomorrow evening. I trust you will have time to attend.* Marcus tossed the invitation aside. "You trust wrong, Ferris. I have no interest in seeing your daughter."

Marcus looked up from reading the *Sunday Times* when a knock sounded on the door nearly an hour later. The door opened and his butler entered.

"The Earl of Loudoun to see you, Lord Ashlund."

Marcus glanced at the clock. An hour and a half late. "Show him in, Bower." Marcus refolded the paper and laid it on the desk as Loudoun entered.

He bowed. "Lord Ashlund, it has been some time."

Marcus indicated the chair in front of his desk. "It has," he said, noting Loudoun hadn't had the good grace to acknowledge his tardiness. It was impossible to civilize a cur.

The earl seated himself. "I understand you wish to see me on a matter of some importance." Bored amusement shone in his green eyes.

"Have you seen your Hastings clansmen lately?" Marcus asked without preamble.

Surprise flitted across Loudoun's features, but he replied, the boredom reaching his voice, "Haven't been to Scotland in an age. Why?"

"They attacked a group of women at Brahan Seer."

Surprise resurfaced. Then… satisfaction in the guise of disbelief. "Come now," he drawled. "Surely, you are mistaken."

"I was there."

"I suppose one cannot question the word of the Marquess of Ashlund. Was your father, the duke, there as well?"

"Nay. You know anything of the attack?"

"Me?" The earl laughed. "I never involve myself in the petty squabbles on that side of the family." He studied Marcus. "Attacked your women, did they?"

Marcus nodded.

Loudoun shrugged. "Probably just wanted a bit of sport. Why bother yourself? If someone had been hurt or if it had been cattle—"

"Do not try my temper," Marcus cut in. "You know nothing of it?"

"As I said, I have little to do with those barbarians."

"In that you may be wise. I assume you still exercise some authority over them?"

"I suppose so. Can't say I've ever cared to try. Their actions are their own, so long as they don't interfere with my life."

"Spoken like a true Campbell," Marcus muttered.

Loudoun's eyes flickered, and there was a biting edge in his cultured voice when he said, "Unlike you, Ashlund, I am far removed from those people. I don't live in the wilds of Scotland, yearning for

the days of old."

"It isn't the days of old I yearn for, but, like any civilized man, simple peace. Yet, it is *your* clansmen who make that impossible."

"Mayhap you should appeal to our king. He is in a better position than I to help."

"Mayhap," Marcus agreed. "Unfortunately, he's not in England. I should warn you, if trouble arises before he returns, you may find your clansmen intruding upon your life. Castle Kalchurn is between Brahan Seer and Assipattle, if I recall."

The earl's face tightened. "You have no cause to threaten me, MacGregor. I've done nothing. I am not involved in this matter, I tell you."

"Ah, but you are. Despite your complacent attitude, you would not be saddened to hear of my demise or the demise of any MacGregor, for that matter—man or woman—which makes you as guilty as your kinsmen. Now," Marcus leaned forward, elbows on his desk, "if there's a possibility you can get to the bottom of this before it turns into something we will all regret, you would find me most appreciative."

"Just what the devil does that mean?" Loudoun demanded.

"It means, my dear Earl, that I might refrain from running a sword through your black heart."

* * * *

Marcus found Kiernan at his favorite club. Pausing to observe his son as he lounged in one of the plush chairs, pride filled his heart at the man the boy was becoming. Kiernan's brow furrowed in response to something he read in the paper spread across the arm of his chair, and a tenderness stirred in Marcus at recalling where Kiernan had learned that look. It amazed him how much the boy resembled Jenna.

The old sadness revived in Marcus. There had been no great love between him and Jenna. The marriage could have been better. She hadn't been happy. Despite his noble blood, he was a Highlander —a clan leader—and Jenna couldn't comprehend the archaic way of life. Marcus hadn't been able to find it in his heart to blame her. She was of Scottish blood, not Highland. *Never the twain shall meet,* she had once said.

Still, he grieved when she died. Kiernan, a boy of ten, had been inconsolable. Marcus worried his son had never quite forgiven the world for taking her from him. Even now, he glimpsed flashes of resentment. They were rare, but the emotion ran deep. Kiernan always seemed to ask—to demand—why Marcus had been unable to save her

when she'd been thrown from her horse. She hadn't died immediately. It would have been better if she had. Instead, she'd lingered a day, an afternoon, really.

Kiernan had stolen into his mother's room while she lay dying. Jenna hadn't wakened. Whether that was better or not, Marcus had never been sure. But Kiernan had said his good-byes. Marcus recalled seeing the lad on his knees beside his mother's bed. When he entered the room, Kiernan remained motionless. Neither moved for some time. At last, the boy rose and left.

Marcus shook off the morose memories. He crossed the room. Kiernan looked up from the paper. His face brightened and he stood, flashing a smile that dispelled the fear in Marcus's earlier memory. He grasped his son's hand and pulled him close. They separated.

"What brings you to London again so soon?" Kiernan pointed to a chair next to his, then sat. "I hadn't thought you'd be here until spring."

"Not glad to see me?" Marcus chided.

A corner of Kiernan's mouth lifted a little higher. "Never say you braved London for me. Why, Father, I don't know what to say." He motioned to a steward. "Two brandies," he said when the man reached hearing distance, then turned his attention back to Marcus. "Or are you missing city life?"

Marcus grimaced. "Nay. I had business with Loudoun."

Kiernan's smile vanished. "Damnation, Father, what sort of business?"

"Unsavory business."

Kiernan grunted. "That's about the only sort you could have with him."

Marcus gave an account of recent events. When he'd finished, he took the final swallow of his brandy.

An all-too-familiar gleam entered his son's eyes. "Perhaps I should return to Brahan Seer. You can use all the help you can get. I'm handy with a sword, if you recall." He flashed a cocky grin.

Aye, Marcus recalled all too well. His son had nearly bested him with his own sword just last year. Damn, the lad was truly grown.

"I do have some good news," Marcus said. He paused. "I am to marry."

Kiernan looked as if he had been hit in the belly. Marcus gave a quick explanation.

A moment later, Kiernan shook his head, his expression disbelieving. "You say she hasn't actually consented?"

"Aye."

"Isn't an announcement a bit premature?"

"No announcements. I am telling only you."

Marcus watched his son. He hoped to glean some insight into Kiernan's thoughts but, aside from obvious shock, he displayed no other emotion. The boy had grown too skilled at hiding the workings of his mind.

"Nothing to say on the matter?" Marcus finally asked outright.

"I assume you care for her."

"I do."

"Then congratulations are in order."

"Aye," Marcus replied, while wondering exactly how he would get Elise to agree. His gaze fell to the *Sunday Times* still open on the arm of Kiernan's chair. "Let me see that." He nodded toward the paper.

Chapter Twelve

The afternoon sun hung low in the overcast sky when Elise came to an abrupt halt outside the storehouse located in the southeast corner of Brahan Seer's compound. Marcus strode past the children playing at the bottom of the hill, headed up in her direction. Her grip on the small sack of flour she held tightened. He'd been gone less than a week. He hadn't delayed in returning to Brahan Seer—neither had he delayed in seeking her out. She had left the kitchen a few minutes ago and he hadn't been there. He could have only just arrived. Only one thing would cause him to come for her before even his horse could be unsaddled: he had found the notice and made the connection between Elise Merriwether and Elisabeth Kingston.

Her heart pounded against her ribs and she had to force herself not to run. *Where would you go*? she asked herself. He made escape impossible. *You think he couldn't find you within the confines of Brahan Seer?* He crested the hill and their gazes met. Her breath caught at the haggard look in his eyes.

He knows.

The children's shouts melted into the background as he halted so close, the warmth of his breath displaced the cool, early summer air against her face. She dropped her gaze and bit back tears. Why did he torture her so?

"Hello, love," he murmured.

Elise jerked her gaze up to his. No anger shone in his eyes. He tugged the sack of flour from her grasp and let it drop to the ground, then wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her close. Passion shot between them in a blazing kiss. She gasped when he showered lush kisses along her chin and down the base of her throat. She inhaled his scent and nearly cried when the familiar fragrance engulfed her senses.

Marcus wrapped his free arm around her and gave her a fierce hug. "I missed ye." He leaned back and looked into her eyes.

Her heart leapt with joy and sorrow in unison. Would it have been better for him to have found the wanted notice and confront her? He brushed aside locks of hair the breeze had blown across her cheek. He crooked a finger under her chin and tilted her face up toward his. Her cheeks warmed and she flicked a glance at the children who seemed oblivious of them. He stroked her lips with his thumb. A dangerous grin flashed across his face.

"Wha—"

Marcus dragged her behind the thick brush around back of the storehouse. He glanced at the massive oak tree behind them.

"Marcus—"

He backed her against the tree and pinned her with his body.

"You can't be seri—" The protest was cut off as much by the sudden awareness of the hard length of him pressing into her thigh as by his kiss.

Marcus broke the embrace just as abruptly as he'd begun, ending the kiss with a loud smacking sound. Elise stared. He grinned. She shoved at his chest. He bent over her once more and she heard his quiet laugh before his mouth covered hers. He parted her lips with his tongue, not asking, but taking. He shifted and the vague awareness of his fingers closing around her wrists penetrated her consciousness. He lifted her hands above her head, pressing them against the tree as he leaned his weight against her. A tremor ripped through her and her body coiled in readiness for the hard press of him against her thigh again. But Marcus released her mouth and, dipping his head, nipped at her flesh from cheek to ear.

"I haven't forgotten how mercilessly you teased me before I left." He rocked against her. The press of him against her weakened her knees. "Feel what you do to me, sweet," he said.

Elise inhaled sharply.

"Aye," he whispered.

Marcus rocked again, then again. She arched as he kissed his way down her neck. He released her hands and tugged down her bodice.

"Marcus!" She forgot the remonstration as his weight lifted from her and he bent, his wet mouth closing over a nipple.

Desire spiked through her. His tongue circled the nipple, then released it. She closed her eyes, shivering as the wind slid across her breast, puckering the bud to a hard peak. Marcus abruptly pulled her away from the tree. She snapped open her eyes. He eased her to the ground. The scent of crushed ivy ground cover enveloped her as he came down beside her.

"They're expecting me to return with the flour," she said. "When I don't—"

"They know I came in search of you." He slipped a knee between her legs. "They won't come."

He covered a breast with his palm and slowly teased the nipple with his thumb, while kissing the other breast. His mouth captured the nipple and a rush of pleasure shot from both breasts to the juncture between her legs. He lifted his head and she forced her eyes into focus. His gaze remained fastened on hers as he ran a hand along her ribs. His palm glided past her waist, then along her thigh. He grabbed a fistful of her skirt and pulled it up. She gasped at the feel of his warm hand flattening against her skin, then caressing her inner

thigh.

"Marcus," she whispered.

He said nothing, only continued caressing upward until his fingers tickled the hair between her legs. She tensed. He kissed the swell of her breast, her neck, her ear, then her mouth, lengthening the kiss as he slipped a finger between her folds. His thumb brushed the nub swollen with desire. She clutched his shoulders. His muscles tensed beneath her fingers. She ached to feel those arms around her. He stroked her deliberately while slipping another finger inside. He released her mouth and leaned his forehead against hers. His breathing grew ragged as he thrust gently with his fingers. His thumb stroked in quicker movements. Pleasure swirled in a restless coil deep insider her, spiking up in wide ribbons of intensity that took her breath away.

Marcus nuzzled her neck. "Come to me."

She started at the whispered words.

"Come to me," he repeated.

And she did.

* * * *

Elise took one of the scones Jinny had baked that evening from the pan on the kitchen counter. They were still warm to the touch. She pulled the tartan covering her shoulders closer as she stuffed half the scone into her mouth and leaned against the counter. Despite a large supper and wine, she had been unable to sleep. Two glasses of wine hadn't been enough. She should have made it three. At least she would have slept, even if fitfully.

Why had she let Marcus touch her? When he left for London, she had counted on him being away longer than seven days and intended on being gone before he returned. Given enough time, Cameron would have seen her confinement for the prison sentence it was. She had planned on approaching him with care. When he thought she had been wronged by Margaret, he understood her desire to leave. An out-and-out demand for release, however, would be viewed with suspicion. After all, why would a woman with only fifty pounds to her name and no place to go want to leave?

She finished the second half of the scone. If she had listened to her head and not her heart and had shunned Marcus… Elise gave a mirthless laugh. She hadn't—and now she had to deal with him while searching for the secret passage Winnie had spoken of.

She reached for another scone, then decided to take some to her room. She found a cloth napkin in the cabinet and wrapped two scones. Male voices sounded in the direction of the great hall as she

had folded the napkin's last flap.

Elise cocked an ear. They approached from the hall leading from the main entrance. Scooping up the scones, she froze at sound of a familiar laugh. *Marcus.* She tightened her hold on the tartan and darted through the kitchen door toward the stairs but was still half a dozen steps from the concealment offered by the staircase when the men burst into the room. Their laughter ceased.

Marcus's "Good evening, lass. What mischief brings you to the great hall tonight?" stopped Elise. She gripped the tartan more tightly about her throat and turned, lifting her hand to display the wrapped scones.

The men looked at the proffered scones and burst into laughter. She began to relax, then caught sight of Marcus's intense gaze.

* * * *

The colors of the throw Elise wore dissolved in Marcus's mind in a blur of red and blue to the memory of her lying alongside him in the ivy. He felt again her body as she trembled beneath his hand, the moist heat of her—

"Good night, gentlemen," she said.

Marcus jerked his attention back to her as she turned to the staircase and started up. He brushed past his comrades and hurried after her. She paused midway up the staircase and looked over her shoulder. He continued forward and she hurried up the stairs and down the corridor to her bedchamber door where she whirled to face him.

"Marcus, perhaps—"

He leaned forward, his shoulder brushing hers as he reached around her and pushed open the door. The door swung wide and he cupped her bottom, lifting her from the floor. She squeaked and threw her arms around his neck, dropping the *plaide* and the scones. He stepped inside, kicked the door shut, and took the final steps to the bed. He fell atop her on the soft mattress.

"I need you," he whispered.

The spicy scent of clean bed linen met his nostrils as he kissed her. The fire crackled and it seemed the heat in his blood ignited in unison. Elise gripped his shoulders. The power in her hold belied the soft compliance of her lips. Marcus ended the kiss.

He rose to his knees and pulled her up and off the bed with him. He tugged the straps of her night rail down over her shoulders, forcing her arms down so that the garment skimmed along her body and pooled at her feet. His heart hammered. At last, she willingly stood before him, soft curves his to touch, her charms his to take. He

forced back the need to crush her beneath him and pound into her heat with all the force in his body and drew her into his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder. He held her quietly until the pounding in his ears dulled to a low roar, then bent and brushed his lips across hers.

When Marcus lifted his head, he held her gaze as he rotated his hips against her. Uncertainty played across her face. She dropped her lashes at the second, more ardent grinding of his arousal against her mound. He stepped back and she looked up in surprise. He raked his gaze over her, then brought his attention back to her face. A furious blush crept up her cheeks.

He unbuttoned his shirt and dropped the garment on the floor. His left boot followed, then the right, leaving him standing in nothing but his kilt. Marcus studied her as he removed his belt and let it, along with the kilt, fall to the floor. The belt buckle clinked on the stone, but Elise's eyes remained fixed on his face. He took the few steps to her and, grasping her wrist, gently brought her hand to his shaft. Her gaze jerked down to where he firmly held her. He wrapped her fingers around him and nearly came to his knees at the cool feel of her fingers against his pounding heat.

"Do I frighten you, lass?" he asked.

Her head snapped up. "No."

Marcus gave a hoarse laugh. Bloody hell, mayhap she wasn't afraid, but he was. He picked her up and carried her to the bed. Placing her on the mattress, he lay down beside her. He ignored the hammering in his head and ran a shaky finger along her arm.

"I'll be gentle," he said.

She frowned. "I won't break."

"Nay, love," he agreed. "But compared to me, you are naught but a feather."

Elise sat upright. "I am no porcelain doll to be kept on a shelf."

Marcus opened his mouth to deny the implication but stopped. "Is that how your husband treated you?"

A long silence drew out.

"You cannot compare me to him," Marcus finally said. "I'm no fool."

She blinked, then rolled to her side and started toward the edge of the bed.

"Nay." Marcus grabbed her.

"You can leave now." She twisted as he yanked her back.

"Nay." He rolled on top of her. "Hush," he commanded when she opened her mouth.

He kissed her. She pressed herself into the mattress, but he lengthened the kiss. She wriggled as though to sidle out from beneath

him, rocking their bodies together. Pleasure shot through him. Marcus ended the kiss, breathing hard.

"Elise," he whispered hoarsely, "you are not discouraging me."

She ceased.

Marcus slipped a knee between her legs. "I am a fool," he said. "I wanted you the moment I laid eyes on you. You know that."

He reached between them and drew apart the folds that protected her sex. He feared, at first, she would resist in earnest and he would be forced to spend yet another night without her, but an instant later, she wrapped her arms about his neck. Marcus touched her in heated strokes. He breathed deep of her scent filling his nostrils, stroking, petting until, at last, she cried out and buried her head in his shoulder. He trailed a long, moist kiss from her ear to a breast, taking the hardened nipple in his mouth.

"Marcus," she groaned.

He continued to tease her while settling himself between her legs. He probed for entrance into her body, aware of the sudden rise and fall of her breast, the subtle tension in her. His body tensed in response, hungry for the resistance. The tip of his shaft slipped into the moist opening.

"You're ready for me," he rasped, and in one swift motion, thrust.

Her nails pierced the flesh of his shoulders. She stiffened. Marcus stilled, waves of pleasure radiating from his groin. He took a shaky breath and focused on her face. His mind instantly cleared at sight of the drawn brow and hard lines around her mouth.

"Bloody hell," he cursed. "I hurt you."

"No," she denied so quickly he wouldn't have believed the pope had he said she spoke the truth.

"You may be no porcelain doll," he muttered, "but you aren't to be misused."

"You don't understand—"

"I understand well enough." He began to lift himself off her.

Elise held fast to his shoulders. "You do not, but it doesn't matter. If you will just continue, it will pass."

He frowned. "If you think I could misuse you—"

"Good Lord." She rolled her eyes.

"What in God's name has possessed you this evening?" he demanded, feeling frustration grow and himself soften.

"You, I thought."

Marcus blinked. He stared at her face for a moment, then dropped his gaze to her breasts. The nipples no longer stood erect. He lowered himself so that his chest brushed the soft peaks. They instantly stiffened. He hardened. He shifted slightly, gasping as the

tight passage closed in around him in a hold he hadn't recalled since—Marcus froze, jerking his attention back to Elise's taut face—since he'd bedded Jenna on their wedding night. She'd been the only virgin he'd ever had, but the memory remained vivid. However, there had been no maidenhead with Elise. She had been married, had a child. She was no virgin.

"Elise," he said in a low voice, "how long since your husband bedded you?"

Her stricken look and the sudden moisture in her eyes told him all he needed to know.

"Love," he said, lowering his mouth to kiss her.

She turned her head aside. "Please."

Marcus kissed her neck instead. Not the kiss of passion he would have given her a moment ago, but a gentle, reassuring kiss.

"The man was a fool," he muttered, and moved inside her, slowly this time.

Her hold remained firm, but she shook her head slightly, refusing to look at him. Marcus lifted his weight from her, withdrawing slowly, then entering again with a quick but shallow thrust. He didn't mistake her tiny intake of breath, then the rise of her body to meet his next thrust. He pulled away, while running his tongue along the edge of her ear. When he thrust again, Elise wrapped her arms around his neck. He kissed her cheek, the corner of her mouth, then coaxed her to him, kissing her full on the mouth. She wound a leg around his calf and he thrust hard and deep before realizing the action.

He stilled. She opened her eyes. He saw no fear, only the question, *Why have you stopped?* He was a fool. Marcus moved again and again and again, until her arms tightened around his back and her walls closed around his shaft as she cried out in her pleasure. When the blinding light of climax shot through his body, he poured himself into her and knew he would never let her go.

* * * *

Elise sat at Marcus's desk in the library and stared at the wanted notice in the *Sunday Times* dated the weekend he had been in London.

> *American-born Elisabeth Kingston wanted for murder is believed to have perished at sea off the coast of Scotland. A ten-thousand-pound reward is offered for information leading to the whereabouts of her body. Anyone with information contact Drew Cummins, Attorney at Law…*

She closed her eyes, willing her pounding heart to slow. If this paper had been meant for Michael, why had it sat folded on Marcus's desk the last four days? The man who had demanded the Campbells deliver Shamus's killer to him wouldn't overlook a wife murdering her husband.

Marcus's anger at discovering that the woman he wanted to marry was a wanted criminal like Shamus's murderer would be even greater. She had eluded Price these past months. After what happened between her and Marcus last night, could she hide from *him*?

* * * *

Marcus strode across the courtyard toward the gate. The drizzling rain, which had fallen since dawn, now turned into the large drops promised by the dark, low clouds. He would be surprised if Elise had ventured into the village on such a dreary summer day. In fact, he had expected her to be shut up in his library. He felt again the acute disappointment at not being able to make love to her before a low fire as he'd planned.

A moment later, he stood on the battlements, scanning the path leading into the village but saw no one approaching. He shifted his gaze to the dark shadows concealing the secret passage, then turned and surveyed the courtyard. The rain hadn't interfered with the daily goings on. People traveled to and from the castle and among the cottages beyond the bailey.

He scanned the grounds, his gaze centering on Winnie's cottage in the distance. He started to turn from the deserted-looking building when the door opened and a woman stepped out. Marcus studied the figure as she hurried down the single step onto the ground and started in the direction of the castle. He followed her progress until he discerned Mary's features, then turned from the wall. Perhaps she knew something of Elise's whereabouts. A moment later, he pushed through the postern door and strode through the eating hall to the kitchen. Mary appeared in the kitchen's back door as he entered.

"Have you seen Elise?" he demanded without preamble.

The girl paused in the doorway. "N-nay, laird."

Marcus surveyed the women in the room, all of whom had stopped their work and were looking at him. "No one here knows where Winnie is?"

A general "nay" went up and he turned from the kitchen. Where the bloody hell was Elise? And as for Winnie…

A cursory investigation of the castle turned up no sign of Elise. Only three weeks earlier he had been searching for her in much the

same manner.

Her absence then was innocent enough. Yet the number of times she had gone to Michael's against his express command, combined with last month's disappearance, unsettled him.

Two hours later, after a more thorough search, including the dungeons, Marcus stalked toward Winnie's cottage. The secret passageway had become his nemesis. At every turn, he feared Elise had somehow managed to escape through it, despite the fact he'd had it sealed from the outside.

He found Winnie's cottage empty. Marcus worked his way through the keep, his temper rising with every step. At last, he reached Lauren's home. Aye, she'd seen Elise, only that had been over an hour ago. He strode from her cottage, across the compound, and into the kitchen. Winnie, this time, sat at the table, plucking a chicken, just as she should have been.

"So, milady," he said, bringing her attention to him, along with that of the other women in the room, "you have returned to the roost."

Winnie looked up from yanking tail feathers from her victim's rump.

"Have you seen Elise?"

Comprehension shone on her face.

"Don't play games with me, Winnie," he warned. "You have seen Elise. I can see it in your eyes."

"No need to get testy." She turned to her chicken. "Try the women's drawing room."

Another five minutes and Marcus shoved open the drawing room door. The women jumped as the door hit the wall with a bang. He swept his gaze across the room before settling dangerously on Elise, who sat on the large couch against the left wall. No one moved as he strode toward her.

"Good Lord, what in the world is wrong?" she blurted when he halted in front of her.

With a jerk of his head, Marcus cleared the room. The door closed with a soft click and he demanded, "Where have you been?"

She blinked. "I-I have just come from Lauren's—"

"Not *just come*. You left there over an hour ago."

"What have I done now?" she retorted in the same dark tone he'd used.

"It never occurred to you to inform someone—*anyone*—where you were going?" Marcus grabbed her shoulders. "Don't do this again." He hadn't realized until seeing her, just how far his fear had run. He hugged her.

She wriggled within his grasp. *"Marcus."*

He leaned back and looked into her face. "The next time you

leave the castle, tell someone."

Her brow furrowed, then her lips pursed. She wrested herself from his arms and tumbled back onto the couch. "Go away," she snapped, and reached to smooth her skirts, which had bunched beneath her.

Marcus sat beside her. "Listen to me. There is mischief afoot, and I won't live in fear for your safety, even within the walls of my own home. Do you understand?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you want from me? I am a veritable prisoner as it is. Now, like some child, I must ask permission before stepping outside my room?"

"Bloody hell, do you think the Campbells came here out of boredom?"

"What do you mean?"

"They wanted you."

She snorted. "That's ridiculous."

He raised a brow. "Is it?"

"What are you saying?"

He thought, *Who are you? Do the Campbells want you simply to hurt me?* But said, "They wish to hurt me. Remember, they tried once before."

"True," she agreed. "But why put themselves in danger in order to kidnap me again?"

"I beg you to trust me," he said. "Allow me some peace. Your confinement is for a short time, I swear."

Elise studied him. "Your father concurs with this *theory*?"

"He does."

"All right."

"There is something else that would ease my mind."

She sighed. "What is that?"

"I'm planning another trip to London. I wish to take you."

Surprise flickered across her face, then her brows rose. "This, after nearly chaining me to the castle walls?"

"Beware, my sweet. You may yet find yourself in chains."

"Sounds very nice, indeed," she muttered.

Despite the feminine nonchalance, Marcus detected caution. Did she suspect what he had in store for her? "I said your incarceration would last only a short time. I will feel more secure if you're with me."

"London?" she repeated.

Ah, there it was, a note of interest. "Aye."

She looked thoughtful, then said, "Perhaps the Campbells would forget about me in the meantime."

"Perhaps," he said, though a niggling doubt said otherwise.

"I will go," she said.
Marcus braced himself. "Good. Then I'll send for Father Whyte."

Chapter Thirteen

"What?" Elise asked softly—too softly.

"I'll send for Father Whyte," Marcus repeated.

"Why?"

"Last I heard, a priest was needed for a wedding."

Her eyes widened. "Married?"

"I said we would marry."

"I never agreed." She looked away.

"You swore not to become my mistress under any circumstances."

Elise looked sharply at him. "Yes, but—"

"Unless we marry, that is exactly what has happened."

She jumped to her feet, backing away several paces. "Not so."

Marcus raised a brow.

Her eyes darkened. "You know perfectly well what I meant when I said that."

"Aye, just as I have said."

"No," she retorted. "I would not be your mistress when you were to marry."

He lounged back against the cushions. "Interesting interpretation."

"It is not an interpretation!"

"Surely, you can understand my confusion."

"You are trying to trick me," she snapped.

"Nay, love. I only point out the facts. When you thought I was to marry, you left. You now know the truth yet are still here. Do you plan on running away again?"

Elise jerked her chin up with such a defiant gesture he had to stifle a laugh, despite knowing fear was the driving factor in her reaction. She blew out a loud, frustrated breath.

He stretched out a hand. "Come."

Elise responded with a quick shake of her head.

Marcus repressed a smile. He remembered the last time he'd offered her his hand. Though reluctant, she had accepted it then. Would she do the same now?

"Come," he repeated.

She again shook her head, but he noted the tiny puckering of her brows. *She doubted.*

"You fear me?" he asked.

Her brow puckered tighter. "You think you are clever, don't you?"

"Not so clever," he replied. "Come."

"I have no intention of being tricked."

"Aye," he replied.

"I-I have to go." She turned.

Marcus dropped his hand to his side. "Where will you go?"

She halted. Relief flooded through him. She wanted him. He stood and crossed to her.

"Come." He grasped her hand and drew her to the couch.

He sat, then gave a gentle but firm yank to her hand, and she tumbled onto his lap.

"I cannot—" she began, but he cut in.

"Let us be honest."

"I have been—"

"You say," he continued, "you *will* be my mistress now that you know I never planned to marry Margaret."

"I never—"

"But wouldn't it be more honest to admit you love me?"

Her eyes widened.

"You can trust me." Marcus discerned a quickening of her breath. He'd hit the mark. "For you know," he added, "I love you."

Elise gasped. He felt the muscles in her body tense in readiness to push from his lap and tightened his hold. She thrashed, though without real violence, and he gripped her chin, turning her face toward his.

"Admit you love me." He kissed her.

She tried pulling away, but he held fast, his mouth gentle until he felt a slight tug when she grasped his shirt. He released her mouth and buried his face in her hair.

"Can you deny what you feel for me?"

"You don't know—can't possibly know—"

"I know all I need."

She grasped his shoulder and pushed him back until their gazes met. "Today doesn't matter. Tomorrow your fancy may change."

Marcus stared at her. "I am no young buck. I know what I want."

She gave a mirthless laugh. "Age has little to do with a man's desire."

He started to speak, to explain that her younger age might not allow for the understanding of his more experienced wisdom, but he stopped, remembering the empty marriage she'd endured.

"Hmm," he began slowly. "One day your feelings for me shall fade?"

"You are cruel," she cried. "You know that is not my meaning."

Marcus's chest tightened. She hadn't denied loving him. He gently squeezed her hand. "I am not Riley."

Elise twisted in his arms in an earnest attempt at escape. "You overstep your bounds, *milord*."

He barely repressed a sudden laugh when she thumped his arm with a small fist. She shoved at his chest and Marcus hugged her so close their lips almost met.

"Surely, I have proven I am not faithless," he demanded.

"Faithless? Good Lord, you're lucky I don't sacrifice you for my own selfish needs."

"Needs? Aye, lass, you need me. Nay," he added when she opened her mouth to interject. "Don't think I am ignorant of your needs." He slid a hand into her hair. "They are not unlike my own."

Marcus kissed her. She breathed deep and he felt his body throb with a need that he now realized had only begun to surface. What would he have done that first day he saw her in the meadow had he known just how badly he would one day need her? Send his men away and take her there—leave her no choice, nowhere to go but to him? Turning and fleeing straight back to Ashlund would have been the wisest course of action. But he would not have—could not have—even then. He had loved—or thought he loved—other women. He had been hurt in the past, but Elise held the power to destroy him. He slid his mouth down her chin and along her neck to the swell of her breast. Her head fell back onto his arm without resistance.

"You would marry a stranger?" she murmured.

Marcus froze.

"Take a lowly servant girl to wife."

He jerked his head up. "I wouldn't relegate anyone to that status, least of all, you."

Her eyes unexpectedly softened. "I know, but that doesn't change the differences in our classes."

"I care nothing for so-called classes. I care about living life."

Her expression turned appraising. "Even you did not flout that responsibility. Didn't you marry out of a sense of duty?"

"Aye. Which is precisely why I will not do so again."

Marcus crushed her lips to his. She didn't protest this time, and he slid her from his lap and onto the couch. Grasping her hand, he slipped it beneath his kilt and forced her fingers around his erection.

Elise started.

"Nay," he breathed in her ear. "Do not run from me. God, you haunt me at every turn." Releasing her fingers, he yanked her dress up and reached between her legs. "Your body responds to me without reservation. Let your heart follow. I promise, I will love you."

He slipped a finger inside her slick heat. Her grip on his shaft tightened convulsively. Marcus drew in a sharp breath, gritting his teeth to keep from spending himself. He removed his hand and slid on

top of her, pressing his lips against her ear.

"Guide me into you, sweet," he whispered. "Let me show you how much I want you. Let me show you what love is."

She did as he urged, and he caressed her with his movements, his body meeting hers, arching away, then gently thrusting again.

"Is marrying me so terrible?" he asked against her neck.

She breathed deep. "No, but after the fact you"—she gasped when he thrust with a quick motion—"you will regret being chained to me."

Marcus laughed. "It will be the sweetest of tortures." He drove deep again.

She cried out as her muscles clenched around him.

"It's not as if you *need* to marry me." She blurted in a strained voice. "I have not withheld myself from you."

Marcus halted. Bracing a hand on either side of her, he looked down at her. "I love you. I want you—*need* you." He held her gaze as he moved slowly, nearly filling her, then thrust quickly and pulled back.

"I haven't left you," she insisted.

"You withhold a part of yourself. If not, you would be dragging *me* to the altar."

Elise reddened.

"You don't trust me." He kissed her ear.

She shook her head. "I cannot believe we are having this discussion in the middle of… that is, I can't believe we are-are doing *this* in the middle of a disagreement."

Marcus chuckled. ""Tis a new experience for me, as well. But, if we must disagree, this is a most pleasant way to do so." He slid his hands beneath her thighs, coaxing her legs around his waist. "Aye." He buried his face in her hair at the nape of her neck and drove into her. "I will protect you." He cupped a breast—she was breathing hard now, she wanted him—needed him.

He thrust quicker. Her breathless response told him she neared her pleasure. "You will be my wife, my marchi—"

"Your servant girl made mistress of the manor," she said.

Marcus jerked, his thrust going hard and deep. Elise gasped. He remained inside her, full to the hilt. "Why did you allow me to touch you?" he demanded. "Don't say it is because I am lord and you are servant. We both know better. I have the power to care for you, protect you."

At last, uncertainty shown in her expression.

"As my wife, your security is assured. No Campbells, or anyone else, can harm you."

"Nothing is that certain," Elise replied.

"I haven't failed you yet."

Her mouth parted in surprise.

He kissed her mouth and moved in her again. Kissed her forehead, cheek, then ear. "Admit you want me." He quickened his thrusts.

Her muscles tightened around him in readiness for her release.

"Admit it," he pressed. "You want me now and every day and night hereafter."

Elise hugged him tight. "Yes," she cried as her climax rolled over her.

"You are mine," Marcus rasped. "You will not regret the choice."

* * * *

Elise found herself being pulled down the hall of Brahan Seer. Marcus intended to take her directly to his father to announce their *betrothal*. Her head whirled as much from his lovemaking as his proposal. He picked up speed, nearly dragging her down the hallway.

She needed more time. "Marcus, wouldn't it be wise to give this more thought before telling anyone?"

"Nay."

"Slow down. I can barely keep up with you." She tugged on the hand he grasped.

"I can carry you, if you like," he responded, still striding in long paces.

"Good Lord, no. *Marcus*." Elise yanked hard on his hand.

He came to an abrupt halt and she tumbled into his arms.

"Aye, sweet," he drawled. "You wanted something."

"Slow down. I'm not a sack of potatoes to be dragged along behind you."

His gaze dropped to her breasts. "True, and I could easily forget myself even here in the common walkway."

Surely, he wouldn't have asked her to marry him if he'd seen the notice in the paper? Could she live with herself for deceiving him? "You needn't marry me," she said, then silently added, *This is your chance, Marcus MacGregor. Save yourself*. "I can't refuse you," she said, "even here."

His eyes jerked up to meet hers, the amorous light gone. "I believe we were on our way to see my father." Taking her hand once again, he continued at an even more relentless pace.

Five minutes later, they entered the stables where Cameron stood with the young foal born that summer.

"Father," Marcus called.

Cameron looked over his shoulder at Marcus, then her.

"We have an announcement," Marcus said as they drew up beside Cameron.

Cameron's expression turned bemused, but Elise knew better.

"Elise and I are to be married." Marcus's hold on her hand tightened. "And soon."

Her heart jumped into a gallop. "No one said anything—"

"Hush," he commanded, and looked at his father. "Have you anything to say?"

Cameron shrugged. "You are old enough to make your own decisions."

Marcus grinned, and she muttered, "Bloody idiotic men."

Both men regarded her.

She looked back at them. How could she explain that the woman he wished to marry was wanted for murdering her husband? *'You see, my husband poisoned my daughter with tiny doses of the deadly nightshade. The symptoms were subtle, which explains why the doctors couldn't pinpoint the disease. I never caught Robert in the act, but he knew I knew and tried to kill me. I shot him in self-defense. Ignore the wanted notice in the London* Sunday Times*. It will eventually go away.'*

Elise regarded Marcus. "As your wife, I am no longer prisoner?"

"You are not prisoner now," he replied. "You are in the castle for your safety."

"Safety," she murmured, then added, "If I wish to go to the village, you will allow it?"

He nodded. "If it pleases you. I have work I can take care of while we are there."

She narrowed her eyes. "I am no prisoner then?"

"Nay," he answered innocently, and she knew she would get no more.

He would ensure she was watched every second they were at the village. If she played the future wife, he would soon relax his hold. Pain stabbed at her heart.

She had to be gone before his priest arrived.

* * * *

Elise paced her bedchamber. Marcus's son would arrive any hour. Only two days had passed since she'd agreed to marry Marcus. Was he hurrying to Brahan Seer to meet the woman who would marry his father, or to expose her as murderess? How in God's name was she to escape not two, but three MacGregor men?

The fire blazing in the hearth cracked and she jumped. She pressed a hand over her racing heart. Something must be done. She recalled the various decanters of liquor sitting on the sideboard in

Marcus's library and hurried to the library.

She opened the door and met Marcus's gaze as he looked up from the work on his desk. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, love?" he asked.

She closed the door and headed for the sideboard. "I need a drink."

Elise ignored the quizzical lift of his brow as she stopped before the sideboard and surveyed the decanters. She spied the small square decanter filled with cognac. She removed the lid from the decanter, poured a healthy portion into a glass, then emptied it in two unladylike gulps.

She heaved a sigh, then poured another, and finished it just as quickly. She glanced at Marcus and saw he regarded her. "Oh," she said, "how thoughtless. Would you like one?"

He shook his head.

"Well, I do."

The glass reached her lips when Marcus's hand covered hers. "Slow down, lass. You're liable to regret this in the morning."

"Unlikely." She brushed his hand aside, then strolled to the hearth while sipping the cognac.

"Is something wrong?" Marcus inquired.

"Wrong?" She whirled. A delicious warmth radiated through her body. "A few months ago, I was shipwrecked, left penniless and alone, then, naïve little lamb that I am"—she narrowed her eyes at the mirth that leapt to his eyes—"I was pursued relentlessly by you."

"Perhaps what you need is a little comforting," he suggested.

Elise rolled her eyes. "What I need is another cognac."

"Nay."

She gave her head one single slow shake. "Do not think you can stop me from doing as I please. Now or after we're married."

Marcus caught her arm as she approached the sideboard. "Have you not had enough?"

She disengaged herself from his grasp. "I'm capable of handling my liquor. Be so kind as to move aside." She placed a hand on his chest and shoved.

He stepped back as she passed. "You're in a fine mood tonight. I have never seen you this way before."

Elise paused in filling her glass and looked at him. "Regretting your proposal?"

His mouth twitched.

Damn him, she mentally cursed.

"I think I will still wed you," he replied. "I'm looking forward to ravishing your sweet body every chance I get."

"I believe I pointed out you need not marry me to do that." She

lifted the glass to her lips.

"Perhaps," Marcus said. "But it will be my obligation, and I will always know where to find you when my sense of duty calls me into service."

Elise halted mid-sip and narrowed her eyes. "What is that supposed to mean?"

He shrugged. "A wife is always in her husband's bed, aye?" His gaze made a possessive sweep over her body.

She lowered the glass from her lips. "Are you saying you're marrying me to ensure my… my availability?"

His wince and quick "Nay" confirmed the assessment. "I am marrying you because I love you and want you at my side."

A tremor passed through her at the declaration of love given so naturally, but she gave a feminine snort and retorted, "A masculine play on words."

"Nay," he denied even more vehemently.

Elise regarding him more closely. "You're jealous."

"Jealous?" His expression snapped to a stormy darkness. "Of whom?"

She waved her glass, dodging the liquid that sloshed over the rim and onto the carpet. "The funny part is"—the funny part is, she should have created a fictional lover long ago—"you were afraid I would want someone else."

He looked startled and she couldn't help a laugh. Elise placed her glass on the sideboard and came to stand in front of him. A fuzzy sensation in her belly made her feel reckless. Wrapping one arm around his neck, she caressed his jaw with her free hand. She ran her gaze in a purposeful, slow motion from his mouth to his eyes. "Perhaps I should have considered another application or two for my hand."

His arm shot around her. She squealed with the hard yank of her body against his.

"I am marrying you because I cannot live without you," he growled.

But you will, she thought, and pulled away so he wouldn't see the pain that rose too easily to the surface. Elise started for the sideboard and her drink. She reached the tumbler and once again downed the glass.

"Elise," he growled. "Enough."

Despite the sudden fogginess of her vision, she reached for the decanter again. This time, strong fingers pried her hand from the stopper.

"You seem to forget," Marcus said, "my warning about disobeying me."

Elise frowned, the fogginess creeping into her brain. "Ahh, you mean the threat to *distract me with your body*." She laughed. "I think that threat is a little old, don't you?"

Without warning, he swung her into his arms and, an instant later, she found herself on the couch, pinned tightly beneath him.

"I always keep my promises, love, even if it means finding a new twist to an old game."

"I'm not in the mood for your *games* tonight, *milord.* Let me go."

"Nay."

"Marcus." She groaned with the effort of attempting to shove him off her.

He shifted and, grasping her hands, wedged them behind her back. His weight lay fully on her and she wriggled, the increasing cloud across her mind impairing the ability to think. Even as she realized he'd lowered his head and his hair was tickling her chin, the sudden flicker of his tongue dangerously close to her nipple sent a jolt through her. She gave a tiny squeal and he responded with a noise deep in his throat. Gripping her wrists with one hand, he freed his other hand to reached down and yank up her skirt.

"Marcus," she breathed, unexpectedly clear headed, "we're in the library. You cannot!"

But he continued, his tongue—his tongue, she forgot in favor of the finger that slid across her pleasure point. Marcus wound a foot around her ankle and tugged her close until she felt the thick bulge pressed to her thigh. His grip on her hands loosened as a slow thrust slid along her thigh.

"I think ye will find your father in here," came Cameron's voice just outside the library.

Elise stiffened. Marcus yanked her skirt down as the door opened. She squeezed her eyes shut just before Marcus's gaze settled on his father.

"You chose a fine time to visit the library," Marcus said evenly.

"Aye," Cameron replied. "So it would seem. You look well this evening, lass," he added.

She buried her head in Marcus's shoulder, not quite stifling an oath.

"I think you had better do something about your lady's speech," Cameron said. "She's beginning to sound like a sailor."

"Was there something you wanted?" Marcus asked. "Kiernan," he exclaimed.

His muscles tightened and Elise realized he was rising. She grasped his shoulders.

He relaxed and said, "I'll be out directly. Give me a moment." The door closed with a soft click, then he said, "You can open your

eyes now, love. They have gone."

Elise opened her eyes while shoving at him. "Get up for God's sake."

He obliged. "Only a moment ago, you didn't want me to rise."

She sat up. "Your son—he saw me."

"Elise—"

She shot to her feet. "Good Lord, you shouldn't have—"

"Now, love, 'tis not all that bad. You were fully clothed after all"—she groaned and plopped back down onto the couch—"and, truly," he went on, "this has been a household of men for many years. We aren't shocked by a little love-play."

Elise shook her head harder this time.

Marcus gave her a gentle look. "You can't avoid him our entire marriage."

Her stomach did a flip.

"I'll take full blame for the situation."

She paused. "That is the truth."

"Aye," he agreed.

She kept her gaze fixed on him, but she was imagining his son's face as he stared down at them, Marcus on top of her while she arched toward him. If she could only leave the castle tonight. But even an hour's absence would be noticed. Not nearly long enough. She remembered how they had tracked her clear to Glasgow and the damned pawnbroker.

"Leave Kiernan to me." Marcus's voice jerked her back to the present.

She eyed him doubtfully.

He smiled. "Don't concern yourself over it, love. 'Tis nothing."

Elise rose. "I'm going upstairs to change."

"But you look beautiful."

"I can imagine just how I look," she grumbled.

His gaze traveled the length of her, his expression taking on a masculine pride, which started a quiver in her stomach—and reminded her that his son had caught them when that same look was on Marcus's face.

Chapter Fourteen

When Elise finally stepped from the stairwell, Marcus had to remember to breathe. Pleasure rippled through him at seeing she had worn her hair loose. Her creamy skin, luminous against the soft brown of the modest gown borrowed for this occasion, radiated a sensuality, which revived the memory of their earlier lovemaking. Low bodice met high waist, emphasizing the curve of her breasts. The dress hung loosely around her slim body, transforming her into an ethereal creature drifting toward him. She stopped beside him and smiled at his son. Marcus watched Kiernan's acute scrutiny of her as introductions were made. She extended a hand as graciously as any duchess.

"Madam." Kiernan took her hand and brought it to his lips.

Her face lit with enchantment and Marcus breathed a sigh of relief that her misgivings seemed to have evaporated.

"Why, sir," she said, "I believe you are a heartbreaker."

Kiernan blinked in surprise.

"You didn't tell me he was such a rogue, Marcus. I wager the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Marcus smiled. "Kiernan is very much his own man."

Her expression softened. "Perhaps, but that raven's hair and those eyes…"

Memory of similar words spoken to him by her upon their first meeting stole over Marcus.

"They must be your mother's eyes." She smiled at Kiernan.

Marcus snapped back to the present.

Cameron joined them, his raised brow testament that he had overheard the comment. Marcus looked from his son to Elise. It hadn't occurred to him she might speak of Jenna. He had never spoken to her of his wife, and she had no idea of Kiernan's sensitivity concerning his mother.

Kiernan angled his head. "You are correct, madam. I did, indeed, inherit those traits from my mother."

"I see," Elise nodded. "But there's more." A corner of her mouth twitched upwards. "She imparted something of herself to you. A piece of her soul, perhaps." Kiernan looked genuinely shaken and Elise's smile turned gentle. "It is heartening that you carry her with you."

He looked hopelessly at his father but was doomed to find no solace there, for Marcus was as surprised as he.

"Well, now, Kiernan," Cameron's deep voice broke in, "what do you think of your father's future bride?" He gave Kiernan a crack on the back and winked at Elise.

Marcus noted the blush that crept up her cheek and wondered at a woman who could be so bold one moment, then so reticent the next.

* * * *

The following day, Father Whyte arrived. Winnie announced the priest's arrival. Had it been Marcus, Elise would have taken the *sgian dubh* from the wall in the great hall and put it through his heart. That would be a more merciful end than the one he would suffer if his foolishness got them married.

Father Whyte asked if all were well with the wedding arrangements. "A week is a short time to prepare a wedding feast."

"A week?" Elise replied, then remembered Marcus saying the wedding would take place *soon*. He hadn't said how soon.

What if you did go through with the marriage, a quiet voice asked?

Then Price would go free, and Amelia and Steven wouldn't have recompense. But how many more would suffer as a result of Price? She had lost the two most important people in her life. Now she would lose Marcus. All because of her stepfather. But it wasn't so simple. If Marcus—or worse, someone else—discovered the truth, he would pay dearly.

In the end, Elise had seen to Father Whyte's comfort in the small abbey located on the southeast edge of Brahan Seer. Guilt piled higher at the realization that he was enthusiastic about the marriage. Why couldn't he have been one of those pinched-nose priests who believe rank shouldn't mix?

That night when Elise appeared in the great hall and started toward the kitchen, Marcus intercepted her and seated her beside him at the table.

"Winnie is expecting me." She tried to rise.

Marcus laid a firm hand on her shoulder. "Nay. She is not."

Elise glanced at the kitchen door.

"'Tis the way of things," he said. "You will have duties enough after we wed."

After we wed. Her stomach did a flip. Time was running out and she had found no answer as to how she would safely and successfully slip away unnoticed. There remained only one answer; she had to tell Marcus she wouldn't marry him. When all was said and done, he was a good man. Once she demanded to be allowed to return home, he wouldn't keep her prisoner.

Kiernan seated himself beside her. She was surrounded. Elise

listened as he talked of school, friends, and the upcoming season in London. Everything, she thought, except the one thing that must be in the forefront of his mind. How would she respond? What would she say to this keen young man if he questioned her about her past? Kiernan's gaze turned intense. Her heart rate accelerated. Had she missed something in the conversation?

"I do believe," he said, "the *ton* will be set on its ear by my father's new marchioness."

"Marchioness?" Elise repeated.

Kiernan nodded.

Marchioness… Marchioness—the wife of a marquess. Nobility, Marcus was nobility? Elise's mind raced. What rank was a marquess? Baron, viscount, earl, marquis—marquess—she abruptly felt as though a thick fog had enveloped her brain. If Marcus was a marquess, then Cameron—she nearly choked. Marcus was a high nobleman, and she was an accused murderess—a wanted criminal with a bounty on her head.

"Have I said something?" Kiernan demanded in a low whisper.

Elise's attention jerked back to the young man.

"I meant no offense," he went on. "Your forthright manner will be a breath of fresh air for London's tainted society."

"Of course," she responded in a whisper.

His brow furrowed in concern.

Elise shook her head. "Forgive me. The excitement of the wedding—and London…" she let her voice trail off.

Kiernan hesitated, then smiled in polite acceptance.

Supper ended. Elise waited until Marcus had joined his father and son near the hearth before slipping from the hall.

"Where are ye off to?" Winnie inquired as she hurried through the kitchen.

"I am in need of fresh air."

Winnie gave a grunt of understanding as Elise passed out into the night. She hurried across the compound and down the lane to the abbey. Father Whyte hadn't appeared for the evening meal and she prayed he wasn't already abed.

Elise entered the chapel to find him kneeling before the candlelit altar. She stopped, intending to make a quiet retreat, but he twisted and looked at her over his shoulder. The smile on his face died when their gazes met.

"What's wrong, child?" He rose and started down the aisle toward her.

Elise hurried forward, meeting him halfway. "Father," she said without preamble, "if I ask a question, you are obligated to tell the

truth, aren't you?"

"Aye."

"What is Marcus's rank?"

"Rank?"

"Title—rank," she answered impatiently.

"He is the Marquess of Ashlund."

Her heart beat faster. "What is a marquess?"

"In this case, he is the son of a duke."

"A—" Her head reeled. "So Cameron really is a…"

"A duke," Father Whyte confirmed.

Elise collapsed onto a pew.

"Madam!" He caught her hand and fell to his knees before her. "Are you ill?"

"My God," she whispered. "My God." She looked at him. "This is… no mistake?"

He looked confused.

"There's no possibility Marcus will not follow his father's footsteps?"

"Marcus is the only son. He will one day be the Duke of Ashlund."

"My God," she repeated. Then, abruptly looking at the priest, she said, "If I cry off, Marcus couldn't force the wedding?" Would he—could he—actually force her to stay?

"Nay," the priest answered slowly. "He could not force you."

"Father, can you tell me why he hid his identity from me?"

"Hid his identity? I dinna' see, exactly—" He frowned. "You knew nothing of his rank?"

She shook her head.

"But everyone knows. Perhaps he assumed you knew."

"He cannot stop me from changing my mind about the marriage—can he? I left once before and he brought me back."

Father Whyte looked surprised. "He is a powerful man. I hadn't considered such possibilities, but I suppose he could do almost anything." The priest hesitated. "My child…"

Elise's heart pounded. "Good Lord, what?"

"In society's eyes, you and Marcus are married. The wedding vows are a mere formality. You have been through a proper courtship." He didn't acknowledge her unladylike snort. "Everyone assumes—" He stopped. She frowned and he added, "That you already live as husband and wife."

A jolt of embarrassment warmed her cheeks. She'd been a virgin when Robert married her. The possibility of intimacy outside the marriage bed hadn't occurred to her. But then, she hadn't considered the possibility of intimacy at all after Robert.

"Of course," Father Whyte added, "if they are wrong…"

Elise laughed again, this time with bitterness. "You won't find redemption for me there, Father."

"You needn't worry. You are to be wed. As I said, 'tis a formality."

"A formality which carries the weight of the law."

"True."

"And I am free to go?" she insisted.

"Your reputation would be ruined."

"Bah! I don't care a fig for my reputation."

"It would be a terrible scandal for Marcus, as well."

"Would it?" she said with asperity, but guilt surfaced amongst the anger.

A mental picture flashed of the next big headlines in the London *Sunday Times,* "The Duke Who Married a Murderess." The fact it was a lie wouldn't matter.

"The announcements have already reached the papers," Father Whyte said.

"Announcements?" Elise echoed, then said, "But of course."

"Come," Father Whyte's expression softened, "there has been some mistake. Marcus is a good man. Surely, you will listen to his explanation."

"What explanation?" asked Marcus from the rear of the church.

Elise surged to her feet. "Lord Ashlund. Good of you to join us."

* * * *

So she had discovered the truth. Marcus had no one to blame but himself for not telling her. He strode to them and halted beside Elise. He gave an acknowledging nod to Father Whyte, then said to her, "Aye, love. Lord Ashlund, Marquess of Ashlund."

"You lied to me."

He recognized the fear behind the curt statement and gently answered, "Nay."

Her lips thinned. "You deny it?"

"If I led you to believe I was of noble class but wasn't, you would have reason to be angry. The fact I *am* of the noble caste is of no consequence. Have you ever heard anyone here address me by my title?"

Her mouth tightened further. "You kept it from me."

"You are saying I instructed all of Brahan Seer to deceive you? How could I possibly accomplish such a thing? The fact that you learned about this before we signed the marriage certificate proves my point."

"The marriage certificate?" Elise repeated, then, as though to herself, said, "Of course, we would sign a marriage certificate."

"It doesn't matter," he insisted. "Especially here."

She canted her head. "And when we leave Brahan Seer? Isn't that the reason we are doing this because you insisted we cannot leave Brahan Seer without being married?"

"Aye," he replied. "We cannot travel the country and live as we do here. Expectations are different outside Brahan Seer."

"Yes, they are," she retorted. "To the extent you are to be a duke!"

"You aren't being honest," he continued, forcing back frustration. "Admit it. Had you known in the beginning, you wouldn't have agreed to marry me *because* of my station."

"So you did lie."

"I did not."

"Father," she said, keeping her gaze on Marcus, "isn't the sin of omission the same as a direct lie?"

The priest took a deep breath. "It is."

"Are you saying you won't marry me because I will one day be a duke?" Marcus demanded.

"I am saying, I will not marry a man I cannot trust."

"Bloody hell," he cursed. "After all the years the MacGregors have fought for their good fortune, to have it turned against us—"

Her eyes flashed. "Make no mistake, Lord Ashlund, it isn't the MacGregors's good fortune I hold against you."

"It is," he cut in sharply. "If I were Michael's son instead of Cameron's, you would view my suit as proper."

"That is not the point—"

"It is exactly the point. With anyone else I would not have had to say, *You do realize I am a marquess?* Yet, you say that is exactly what I should have done."

"You knew *not* telling me was a manipulation."

"How am I to answer?" he snapped. "Had I made a point of telling you, you would have balked. Yet, *not* telling you is a grievous sin."

Elise eyed him critically. "When did you plan to tell me? Once we arrived in civilization and someone bowed before you?"

"Nay, as I just said, when you signed the wedding certificate you would have known."

"And when would that have been, the moment before we took the wedding vows?"

Marcus looked at Father Whyte. "When, Father?"

"Tomorrow."

Marcus looked back at her. "A far cry from the wedding day."

"But far too long considering the length of our *courtship*."

"You're being foolish." He grasped her arm.

She shook him off. "How did you expect me to react?"

He wished mightily Father Whyte weren't present. "I had hoped some feeling had developed that would negate these foolish concerns."

"I need to be alone with my *foolish concerns*." She brushed past him.

Marcus glanced at Father Whyte, who gave him a troubled look, then Marcus shifted his gaze onto Elise as she disappeared out the chapel doors.

* * * *

Elise closed her bedchamber door, then walked to the couch and sat down. Placing a hand on her belly, she pressed it in an attempt to quiet the twisting, which had begun as a flutter and was now a wrenching unlike anything she had experienced since the last night on the *Amelia*.

Elise Merriwether would be the name of the woman to marry the Marquess of Ashlund. It was foolish for her to have given her great-aunt's surname, but when she'd come out of her delirium in Josh and Shannon's home, she'd given the first name that came to mind. Would Price connect that Elise Merriwether to her? Her mind raced. Would he see the notice? The announcement would go into the London *Sunday Times*, probably *The Scotsman* in Edinburgh, as well. But would the news reach America? She thought of the Boston papers and recalled the news when King George III died and his son took his place. Occasionally, large business ventures were reported, but she couldn't recall any marriage announcements for the nobility.

Elise released a shaky breath. It was unlikely the announcement would make the American papers. She leaned back against the cushions and closed her eyes. Looking back, it now seemed ridiculous she hadn't realized there was more to the MacGregor men than mere wealth. She had missed all of the warning signs. How had she been so blind?

"Oh, Marcus," she whispered. "What have you done?"

A duke can protect even a murderess, her mind contended. Her insides gave a vicious twist. He could, she agreed. But could his reputation survive the scandal? And could she live with herself for hurting him?

First thing tomorrow morning, she would go to Cameron and demand to leave.

* * * *

At the sound of voices in the great hall, Elise paused on the stairs. Who would be roused at this early hour? It wasn't yet dawn.

"I know what ye told me," a young male voice said.

Tavis.

"Aye," came another, deeper voice.

Marcus.

"I'm willing to take my punishment, laird," Tavis said.

Elise didn't breathe.

"I told you not to leave Brahan Seer again," Marcus said. "You are a man—the only man in your household. You're old enough to understand that responsibility."

Elise crept down the remaining four stairs and peeked around the corner. They stood on the far side of the table nearest the postern door, Marcus's hand on Tavis's shoulder, Tavis's gaze downcast. The worry on Marcus's face stirred something deep within her. The day the Campbells attacked, he had been ruthless. But this was a gentleness as kind as his ruthlessness had been cruel.

"The thirst for revenge will eat a man alive," he said. "I swore to deal with your father's murderers, and did. Leave it be." He sighed, the action revealing a great weariness. "If those dogs came for you, even with a warrant from King George, I wouldn't give you up." A tiny smile played at his mouth. "Lad, we aren't as different from the Campbells as we believe. They were as unwilling to hand over their kinsmen as I would be."

Elise couldn't check a surge of hope. He would not give up one of his own—even in the name of justice?

Marcus crossed his arms over his chest. "I have no intention of facing your mother with the news that you have followed your father to the grave. Therefore, you go to London."

Tavis gasped.

"Nay," Marcus said. "You will have no more opportunities to go wandering off by yourself." He raised a brow. "You know your sister follows."

"I made sure she did not," the boy protested.

Marcus laughed. "Never underestimate a female, no matter her age."

"Laird," Tavis begged, "I promise—"

"Nay," Marcus said shortly.

"Not London then, but Edinburgh."

Another laugh from Marcus, this one tinged with fondness. "London it will be, lad. Edinburgh is too close for comfort."

"Laird," Tavis said, desperation in his voice.

The mirth in Marcus's eyes faded. "Erin will accompany you to

England."

Elise felt her breath quicken. A decree she would have made had she the power. Realization washed over her in a tidal wave. If she confessed the truth, Marcus would sail across the ocean and kill Price with his bare hands. If she disappeared, he would leave no stone unturned until he found her. If she told him she would not marry a duke, he would follow her to the ends of the earth in order to change her mind.

God help him, he loved her.

And God help her, she wouldn't sacrifice him… not even for Amelia and Steven.

* * * *

Marcus entered the great hall the following afternoon to discover the room filled with people and humming with unexpected excitement. He scanned the familiar entourage until his gaze settled on his cousin Sophie and, to his surprise, Elise, who looked as though she hadn't a care in the world. The two women stood, profiles to him, and neither had noticed his entrance. He hung back near the door, watching.

He hadn't spoken with Elise since she left him standing in the abbey the night before. He had gone to her room early this morning and found her bed empty. She had slept there, however, a fact he had verified in the dead of night. His search that morning didn't turn her up in the kitchen or the ladies' drawing room. Even his library, a favorite haunt, had been empty. The kitchen maids informed him she and Winnie had gone to visit Chloe.

Marcus studied Elise. What had transpired after she'd sequestered herself in her room? What other ridiculous considerations surfaced during those waking hours? She hadn't sought him out to inform him there would be no wedding. Neither had she confirmed there *would* be a wedding. No note, no message, nothing.

He shifted his attention to his cousin. Sophie, Lady Whycham, was one of the few Ashlund relatives he liked. Though petite, her flaming red hair and voluptuous body had made her all the rage before she wed Justin Ellington, the Earl of Whycham.

She caught sight of him, ceased speaking, and raised a meticulously plucked brow. Elise turned, and he started toward them.

"Sophie," he said as he neared. "What brings you here, lass?"

"Don't play the innocent with me, Marcus MacGregor. You know full well I would not let my favorite cousin wed without me." The keen curiosity in her gaze vanished and her eyes narrowed in a fashion that Marcus knew well. "I am wondering, Cousin," she said,

"why it is I read of your engagement in the newspapers instead of hearing it from you."

Marcus looked at Elise, whose impassive expression didn't quite hide the sense that she, too, wondered the same thing.

He slid an arm around Elise. She stiffened. The small hope inside him sagged, but he kept his gaze on her. "When last I visited Ashlund, I had no notion I would marry."

"No?" Sophie said, bringing both their attentions onto her. "Still, you could have sent a personal missive."

He again felt Elise's thoughts echo the question, and he looked down at her. "Forgive me, Sophie," he said, and smiled gently at Elise. "Since Elise agreed to be my wife, I have thought of little else."

"Not so, Cousin," Sophie replied. "You didn't forget the formal announcements."

Marcus shot his cousin a sharp look.

Sophie groaned. "Elise, are you sure you will be able to put up with him for the rest of your life?"

Marcus started. He cursed silently at Sophie, then his future wife when her expression remained unreadable save a hint of curiosity.

"Everyone is speculating about the woman who has captured Marcus's heart," Sophie went on.

"Good Lord," Elise blurted

Sophie laughed. "Didn't you know, my dear? Marcus is a confirmed bachelor."

Marcus stilled as Elise looked directly at him for the first time. "Really? I wouldn't have believed it."

"Why is that?" Sophie asked, the eagerness in her voice so transparent that Marcus wanted to thrash her.

"Because your cousin pursued me with such a vengeance that I would have thought he was desperate for a wife."

Sophie burst into howls of laughter, and his desire to laugh with her forced him to cough loudly several times.

"Does this," he began, but halted abruptly to clear his throat before saying, "Does this mean—"

"This means, sir," Elise cut in, "you should attend to your guests."

He opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again.

* * * *

Elise opened the door to the library and stepped aside. "Forgive me, Lady Whycham. I hadn't expected company, so the ladies' drawing room isn't ready to receive guests."

"Call me Sophie." She brushed past Elise. "We shall soon be related. No need to stand on formality. Now," Sophie seated herself on the divan and waited until Elise had taken a seat beside her, "tell me what my cousin has done to annoy you."

Elise startled but managed a hasty, "I'm not sure what you mean."

Sophie's eyes twinkled. "I know my cousin." She laughed, a small snort escaping in the process. "Still, he did surprise me with the decision to wed again." She leaned close. "Marcus had formed no lasting attachments since Jenna's death. Though he is no womanizer—he is a remarkably discriminating man—he isn't one to refrain from female company."

"I didn't have the impression he denied himself the company of women," Elise said dryly.

Sophie's eyes widened with mirth and she clapped a hand over her mouth. Elise blinked, then gave into the infectious laughter.

Sophie lowered her hand. "All right, *Cousin*, what has he done?"

Elise hesitated. How did she explain that Marcus hiding the fact he was a rich and powerful man could prove to be his *and* her undoing?

When Elise had finished relating the tale of how she had come to Scotland and of Marcus's deception, Sophie took a deep breath. "I suppose learning the man you're to marry will one day be a duke could be a shock. But the fact he cares for you—" Sophie halted, and Elise knew her shock showed.

"You doubt his feelings?" Sophie asked.

She didn't, but she hadn't grown used to the idea, and the fact Sophie had so easily seen it made her want to cry. So, she countered with, "How can any woman know what a man thinks?"

"Come now, you must comprehend that Marcus isn't a man to make a commitment lightly."

"What I comprehend is that Marcus is a man accustomed to having his way."

"That is true of any man with half a wit."

Elise couldn't help laughing. "I suppose you're right."

Sophie's expression softened. "You aren't betraying your husband by loving again."

Elise nearly choked. "N-no, of course not."

"There is no one for you to return home to?"

She recalled the blood darkening Steven's coat. "No."

"Your husband's family, what of them?"

"There is no one."

Sophie sighed. "A shame."

"Yes," Elise replied, and couldn't prevent a picture of the two

who waited for her at the bottom of the sea. Her chest tightened and she rose. "Would you care for a drink?" She crossed to the sideboard. "Marcus keeps an excellent Napoleon brandy."

"Brandy?"

Elise paused, her hand on the decanter lid, and twisted to look at Sophie. "Don't tell me you're going to lecture me. Are all MacGregors so puritanical?"

Sophie's eyes lit with amusement. "I've heard the MacGregors called many things—bloodthirsty, uncouth, barbaric, ignorant—but never have they been compared to anything so noble. Puritanical, indeed."

Elise couldn't resist. "There is port, if brandy is too strong for you."

"Brandy it is," she said without hesitation.

Elise poured two glasses of the brandy and returned to the divan. She handed a snifter to Sophie, then sat down.

"Did I mention that I tried escaping to Australia?"

"I do not recall the story," Sophie replied with such gravity that Elise couldn't help wondering if someone had indeed repeated the tale in the short time the countess had been there.

"Marcus's men retrieved me," Elise said.

"Retrieved you?"

"It seems strange now that I left," she said more to herself than Sophie.

"What happened when my cousin's men came for you?" Sophie asked.

"Cameron sent them. Marcus wasn't aware I had left. He told me if he had come, it would have gone far worse for me."

"I can well believe that. Why did you leave?"

Elise grimaced. "The reason was sound."

"Do you mean to extract a little revenge now?"

Elise looked at Sophie. "Things aren't always as simple as they seem."

Sophie nodded once. "And often not as complicated as we think. What stops you from leaving again?"

"He would only come for me again."

"But of course," Sophie agreed. "There is nowhere you could hide from *him*. I do see your point."

Elise looked sharply at her. Merriment danced in Sophie's eyes, and Elise realized she referred to Marcus and not Price, as her imagination had jumped to think. She was hallucinating—either that or drunk.

"Just how rich is my husband-to-be?" The countess's eyes widened, and Elise cried, "Good Lord, that didn't come right at all."

She groaned and collapsed against the divan back.

"I imagine you wonder what sort of reception you'll receive once you leave Brahan Seer?"

Elise's heart jumped, but the reaction was stalled by the honesty that shone in the countess' eyes. "I swear, Sophie, as foolish as it sounds, I had no idea he was a duke. Here at Brahan Seer… I knew him as Cameron's son and leader of the MacGregor clan. I knew they weren't destitute, but a duke!" She laid a hand on Sophie's hand. "I am no duchess."

"And I was no countess," Sophie replied.

"What?"

"I was only Lady Ashlund. Of course, my family has money." Sophie's eyes danced. "All Ashlunds have money. But, then, so does Justin."

"Ashlund," Elise repeated. "They are MacGregors?"

"Oh, no. Ryan MacGregor married Helena Ashlund about one hundred and fifty years ago. Helena was an only child, therefore, the dukedom fell to Ryan when Helena's father Coll Ashlund died." Sophie shook her head and a shadow passed over her face. "That was a terrible time. The MacGregor name had been outlawed."

"The clearances?" Elise asked.

"Oh, no. Those atrocities are much more recent," she said. "There was a great deal of political strife"—Sophie laughed—"when hasn't there been political strife in Scotland? In any case, the crown seized MacGregor land, and the MacGregors fought back. It is said in our family that, if not for Helena marrying Ryan, his brand of the MacGregors, Marcus's line, wouldn't be here today."

"Ashlund money," Elise murmured.

"You have it," Sophie said.

Indeed, Elise thought. *Now what am I to do with it?*

Chapter Fifteen

Much later that evening, Marcus pushed past the cluster of men outside the library doorway watching Elise and Sophie, each with a glass in hand as they sat on the floor in front of the fire giggling like school girls. He stopped and looked from the women to the decanter on the floor beside them. On the sideboard, other decanters sat in disarray. Some had been left uncovered—one actually lay empty on its side. Marcus turned his attention back to the women. He could scarce believe his eyes. They were drunk.

The women looked up as he strode toward them. "I suppose 'tis my fault for not looking for you here first." He stopped before them.

Elise and Sophie looked at one another and shrugged.

"I told you to inform someone of your whereabouts."

"Told me?" Elise's brows rose sluggishly. "I seem to remember you as-as-" Her gaze cut to Sophie. "A difficult word—asking me," she got out in a quick breath, then looked at him again. "But, then, I'm not surprised you remember it differently."

Laughter emanated from the men.

"And in case you hadn't noticed," she went on between hiccups, "I haven't left the confines of the castle." Despite the slight slur in her words, they were said with emphasis.

Another ripple of low laughter came from the men and Marcus shot them a quelling look. Cameron coughed and Kiernan raised a brow while the others' mouths twitched with amusement. Marcus turned his attention to Sophie.

"I see you are introducing my future wife to the niceties of polite society."

Sophie looked at Elise, who said, "I do believe he is blaming you." Leaning into Sophie, Elise added in a loud whisper, "Just like a man, wouldn't you say?"

The gales of laughter that swept the room increased when Elise gripped the seat of the chair with one hand, while clutching her glass with the other, and began scrambling to her feet. Marcus reached to assist her. She batted his hand away and rose onto unsteady feet. She swayed, grabbed the back of the chair, and leveled her gaze on him.

"Now see here, Marcus MacGregor, we'll have none of your lectures tonight." She pushed at his chest with the hand that held the glass. "Lady Whycham and I are enjoying ourselves and we don't need you or anyone else telling us what we should do. Isn't that right, Sophie?"

"Right," agreed Sophie. "We don't need you or anyone else."

"If you will excuse us." Elise reached down and grasped Sophie's

hand. She pulled, nearly falling onto Sophie before finally helping her to her feet. Sophie smoothed her skirts as Elise faced Marcus. "Lady Whycham and I are going to see to the preparations for the banquet."

Shoving her glass into his hand, she headed for the door, Sophie on her heels. A picture of the two women falling down the stairs and breaking their lovely necks flashed in his mind, and Marcus sat the glass on his desk and started after them. The men parted for the ladies, stepping back an extra pace when he charged past. He grabbed the women as they reached the stairs, pushing Sophie toward his son and scooping Elise into his arms.

"Put me down!" she sputtered, but he ignored her, hurrying down the stairs and into the great hall. When he reached the table, he dropped her into a chair.

"He's peeved," Elise commented to Sophie, who had been set in the chair beside hers.

"Serves him right," she replied.

Marcus stifled an oath and ordered a kettle of tea. When the strong brew began to clear their senses, he watched with satisfaction as they rubbed their temples.

"Brute," Elise muttered, casting a dark glance in his direction. She rose and headed for the stairs, adding loud enough for all to hear, "I wager Sophie agrees with me."

"Damnation, Elise," Sophie paused in rising, "must you shout?" She, too, started for the steps.

Elise paused at the stairs and glanced over her shoulder. Marcus met her gaze, but she only shook her head and turned to go up the stairs.

"You're to be married in two days," Sophie said, taking the first step behind her. "Perhaps you should give serious thought to your decision, Elise."

Marcus jumped from his seat at the table. By God, he would strangle her. He strode across the room. Halting at the bottom of the stairs, he called up to them, "Sophie, you would do well to keep your thoughts to yourself." His voice echoed up the narrow staircase and both women halted, covering their ears.

"Of all the nerve," Sophie complained as they started up again. "Marcus, I never knew you to be so perverse. Mayhap you should reconsider, Elise. I wonder if any of us know him at all."

Marcus took the stairs two at a time and, in a flash, reached Sophie's side. "You will retire to your chambers *now*, Cousin," he growled.

Grasping her elbow, he hurried her up the stairs ahead of him until they reached Elise. Marcus grabbed her elbow with his other hand and forced them up the remaining steps ahead of him. He

escorted them down the corridor until they reached Elise's chambers. He shoved Sophie in the direction of her room, opened Elise's door, and thrust her inside.

"Don't leave this room the remainder of the evening. I will have dinner sent up."

Elise mumbled something unintelligible as he clicked the door shut behind him.

When Marcus reentered the hall a moment later, the low laugher of the men cut short. Those sitting at the table seemed absorbed in the odd task of examining the tabletop. Marcus looked closer as he neared them and discerned the collective struggle to keep from bursting into laughter.

"Out with it!" he boomed. "I couldn't live with the guilt of someone bursting a blood vessel."

No one made a peep, and he threw his hands into the air and headed for the sanctuary of his library. When he was halfway up the stairs, the hall filled with laughter. Marcus paused, torn between cursing the men and joining them, then shook his head and hurried up the stairs.

* * * *

At the light tap on his library door, Marcus ceased speaking to Harris. The door opened and Sophie peered inside.

"Oh," she said, "forgive me. I didn't know you were busy."

She started to back away and Harris said, "We can finish later, Marcus. I have enough here to begin work." He lifted his notebook to indicate his notes.

"No," Sophie began, but Marcus waved her in. Harris rose, bowed to Sophie, then left them alone. She seated herself in the chair Harris had occupied, and said, "You seem to have accomplished a great deal this morning." She motioned to the open ledger on his desk.

"I rise early," he replied.

"It is a beautiful morning."

Marcus gave her an appraising look. "I would think after yesterday evening that this morning would not be so pleasant for you."

Sophie smiled. "I have a strong constitution, as you well know." She settled back against the cushion and regarded him. "Do not say you are truly angry with me."

"Shocked. As Justin would be, I wager."

"My God!" she exclaimed. "Mayhap Elise was right."

"Right about what?" he asked sharply.

"She commented on the puritanical characteristic of the MacGregors."

Marcus tossed aside the quill he'd been holding and lounged in his chair. "I assume this is in reference to me?"

"You were the original topic of conversation. But never mind that. I like Elise."

"Aye?"

"Yes. She told me the harrowing story of how she came to be here. I am curious, though, what it is she is omitting."

"What do you mean?"

Sophie's expression softened. "It is plain you care for her."

"Sophie—"

"Don't become annoyed with me, Marcus. We have known one another too long for such foolishness. I am pleased you have found a woman to care for, and approve of the match."

Marcus raised a brow.

She gave him a dry look. "You comprehend what I mean. Now, tell me, what is she hiding?"

He took a deep breath. "I have yet to find out."

Sophie smoothed her dress. "She isn't given to talking about herself, even half in her cups. Which do you think is most likely: that she has committed a crime or has run away from her husband? Either one would allow for her gentle upbringing."

He prayed to God she hadn't run away from a husband. What would he do if that were the case?

"Those are not the only possibilities," Marcus said. "It may be her husband was in debt and she has no means to repay the creditors."

"Quite right," Sophie said. "I hadn't thought of that."

Thus far, his investigations had turned up no record of a ship sinking in Solway Firth, nor had any ship docked in the firth. There had, however, been a terrible storm the day before Shannon and Josh found Elise. The ship may have sunk as Elise said. The report of ships docking in Edinburgh and London gave no clues as to what ship she might have sailed on. The report on ships leaving Boston harbor had yet to reach him.

Marcus focused on his cousin. "I will have no meddling in this affair, Sophie."

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Of course not."

"I am serious," he added.

"Marcus, I don't interfere in the affairs of others."

He gave her a reproachful look.

She screwed one side of her mouth into a wry smile. "Not really, I don't, and you cannot deny that I have never interfered in your life."

"True."

"But that doesn't mean I can't see what is happening. What

measures have you taken to discover the truth?"

"That is nothing you need concern yourself with."

Sophie sighed. "I feared you would say that. Marcus. I like the girl. Still, I would ask that you inform me if any… problems arise."

"I will keep your request in mind," he said, and wished her a good day.

* * * *

Her wedding day brought with it all the promise of a hailstorm in June. Wind blew in clouds so dark, it looked as though God's wrath would rain down upon them. Elise sent up a prayer of thanks for Sophie's experienced hands. She held her breath while Sophie deftly fastened the buttons that went from the neckline of the yellow silk gown to the small of her back.

"There." Sophie gave a final tug to smooth out the dress. Elise turned as Sophie reached for the matching lace veil. "Look at this beautiful work."

"Yes," Elise agreed. "Winnie is a master needlewoman."

Sophie smiled and positioned the veil's band atop Elise's hair. The lace fell to her waistline. A lace overskirt continued the illusion of fog amid petals to the floor. Sophie stepped back. Elise watched her soon-to-be-cousin, touched by the genuine pleasure on her face.

"Lovely." Sophie's expression sharpened. "Well, Cousin, you've done it now."

Elise glanced at the clock on her mantel. "I still have half an hour."

"A full thirty minutes in which to explain to Marcus why you changed your mind."

Elise jerked her gaze onto the countess.

"Come now, you know your anxiety is only due to the gravity of the vows you will take." A gleam appeared in Sophie's eyes. "Unless you fear you cannot keep your vows."

"You MacGregors," Elise began, then amended, "Ashlunds," at the look on Sophie's face. "Born troublemakers."

"A long line of troublemakers." Her mouth assumed an impish grin. "Perhaps you are nervous about the wedding night? I have not once seen Marcus making his way to your room."

"Good Lord! Is nothing sacred?"

"No," she said, then picked up the bouquet that lay on the bed.

Elise looked again at the clock, then back at Sophie. "I still have twenty-five minutes. Sophie," she began, but Sophie cut her off.

"I will await you in the drawing room."

Elise smiled her thanks. As Sophie closed the door behind her,

Elise seated herself on the couch. Twenty-five minutes from now, the key that bound her soul to Amelia and Steven would lay at the bottom of the sea with them. She had considered using her position once she married to quietly bring about Price's fall, but had recalled Marcus's words *"The thirst for revenge will eat a man alive."* The same was true of a woman.

She was trading Steven and Amelia's rest for Marcus's safety. May they forgive her.

Chapter Sixteen

At sight of Marcus dressed in a new kilt, a crisp, white lawn shirt meticulously tucked into his waistband and buttoned to the neck, and a bonnet cocked to one side, Elise faltered the last few steps from where he stood at the altar. In minutes, this man would be her husband. Her gaze met his and she saw there an intensity that demanded she leap into his arms from across the final precipice that separated them. Her knees weakened. Marcus held out his hand. She flushed and dropped her gaze.

He grasped her hand in a firm grip, turning with her to face Father Whyte. The priest spoke the Latin vows slowly, then patiently waited until she repeated them as he had coached. Marcus repeated his vows and, before Elise realized it, he slipped a large emerald onto her finger. The ring was a size too large, but her heart skipped a beat at the weight of the jewel and the cool of the metal encircling her finger. Father Whyte gave the final blessing and a shout went up when Marcus took her in his arms. Her attention jerked from the emerald to him as he finalized the ritual with their first kiss as husband and wife.

Hand on her back, Marcus guided her around to face the guests who stood cheering. He urged her down the aisle and out the chapel doors. The crowd waiting outside shouted in exultation, and those following joined in more shouts. Waves, squeals, and cries of good wishes followed them to the castle. Marcus opened the postern door and Elise stepped inside.

With a sweep of her gaze, Elise took in the gold and purple swags adorning the walls, the velvet surfaces softening the light cast by sconces burning from holders erected while she slept last night. On the far side of the room, hung on each end of the wall, were two intricately woven tapestries depicting Highland men in battle. The table was laden with food, and serving girls dodged guests who had arrived too late to find space near the chapel. Another cheer went up and several women hurried forward, grasped Elise's arms, and whisked her across the room to a place near the hearth. She was instantly surrounded. Sophie stood among their ranks and she gave Elise a knowing look. Elise turned to see Marcus reach the opposite side of the room, a glass of whiskey already in hand, his friends clapping him on the back.

The men spoke loudly and, despite the din, Elise caught bits and pieces of their bawdy suggestions for the wedding night. Her female companions giggled, all but Sophie, whose mouth twitched, and Elise realized they, too, had heard the advice given her husband. Her cheeks warmed and she wished very much for the quiet of her

bedchambers. *Her bedchambers*. Goose pimples prickled her arms. *Their* bedchambers. She would occupy the lady's chambers, but she wouldn't sleep there. The look in Marcus's eyes when the priest had pronounced them man and wife had dispelled any doubts about their wedding night. Sophie was right; she'd done it now.

Serving girls emerged from the kitchen, trays piled high with lamb, beef, chicken, delicately stuffed quail and wild pheasant. Salmon, perch, flounder and whitefish followed, all caught from the fresh waters of Loch Katrine and Lock Lommund. On the way to the castle, Elise had glimpsed the wagons loaded with meats, cheeses, fruits and vegetables that would be carted to the village so that all who had crossed MacGregor land for the wedding could partake in the festivities.

She had overheard Marcus give instructions for fine liquors to be included in the bounty. Elise glanced his way. He stood among the warriors and peasants as though among equals. Who, but the wealthy —those who need not worry for tomorrow's bread—stood so casually? *And what of those who toil for the bread to feed those they love?* something deep inside her whispered.

Her heart pricked. Idiot that she was, not until two days ago had she found the presence of mind to go to Marcus's library and research the Highland clan system. Knowledge is power, her father had said. She had forgotten that precept. Had she followed her head instead of her heart, the moment her traitorous heart had stirred at the sight of Marcus MacGregor she would have made it her business to know his business. A chill stole through her and settled in her gut. What good had that done her with Robert? His family was counted among the elite of Boston, yet he had been a murderer. Elise focused abruptly on the man and woman who stepped before her.

The woman offered a bundle wrapped in simple cloth. "For ye, m'lady," she said in a thick accent.

Elise reflexively reached for the parcel. "Thank you."

She untied the twine that bound the bundle. The knot loosed easily and the cloth fell away to reveal a finely stitched linen blanket. Elise slipped a finger beneath the material's folds and, grasping it between her fingers, ran them along the edge.

"It's beautiful," she breathed, and opened the blanket to its full four feet. She placed the cloth covering on the hearth's mantel, then pressed the linen to her cheek. None finer had she found, even in the expensive boutiques of Boston. "How soft." She looked questioningly at the woman.

The woman blushed. "We grow the flax. I harvest the reeds, then make the linen."

Elise stared. She knew the arduous task of creating linen. As a

young child, she had watched her great grandmother, a woman of seventy-two years, draw bundles of flax (straws pulled, not cut, her great grandmother stressed, for cutting made the stems useless) across boards filled with spikes set far enough apart to allow the flax stalks through but not the seed heads. That was but the beginning of the long process that led to the creation of the yarn used in the weaving.

Elise looked at the woman. "I've never seen finer work."

The woman blushed deeper and glanced from her husband back to Elise. "'Tis a blanket for the bairn."

"Bairn?"

The woman smiled. "The one sure to come next spring."

Emotion shot through Elise. The memory of Amelia as a newborn, wrapped in swaddling cloth, flashed before her only to be replaced by Amelia's lifeless body wrapped in a white burial shroud.

Another child?

She jerked her gaze onto Marcus. As though aware of her alarm, he looked in her direction. His attention focused on the blanket she still pressed against her cheek. His eyes softened and she knew he realized the blanket's significance. Elise dropped the blanket from her cheek and looked back at the man and woman.

"Thank you," she said in a hoarse voice.

The man looked at his wife, his pride in Elise's reaction taken as proof they had pleased the lord's bride. He gave a small bow and ushered his wife away. Elise turned and came face to face with Sophie.

"Shall I take that?" Sophie placed a hand on the blanket.

"Oh, Sophie," she cried in a small voice, "what have I done?"

"One never quite forgets the pain of losing a child," Sophie said.

The bagpipes struck up, followed immediately by the fiddle, then the remaining instruments blended into one for Elise. She watched as Sophie lifted the blanket and examined the intricate pattern.

"Society would pay a great price for such work," she commented. "And to think you found it here in the Highlands." Sophie looked up from the blanket. "Interesting what one finds in the most unlikely places."

Hours later, the revelry showed no signs of abating, so Elise retired. Sophie saw to her undressing, then the donning of the nightgown she had given Elise as a wedding gift. The gown made of pale-green silk brushed her ankles. She hadn't worn a night dress so fine since leaving Boston. Sophie slipped the sleeves of the matching robe over her arms. Elise examined the small satin rosettes encircling each sleeve hem.

"Lovely," she murmured.

Sophie stepped back and surveyed her. "*You're* lovely, and Marcus is sure to agree."

Elise grimaced, although inwardly she trembled. The heated look in his eyes when she'd turned before going up the stairs made her stomach do somersaults every time she remembered their passion. Why in heaven this should be so, she couldn't fathom. Tonight would not be the first time they'd made love. How much closer to *love* might tonight bring her?

Sophie assisted her into the large, four-poster bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. She kissed Elise's forehead then left. When the door clicked shut, Elise turned onto her side, facing the low-burning fire. Sophie had said the men would keep Marcus occupied well into the night. It seemed every time she had glanced in his direction, his glass was being filled. Father and son were following his example. She expected the lot of them to pass out on the stone floor of the great hall.

A glint from the corner dresser drew her attention. A gold chain, another gift from Marcus, sat beside a garnet-crowned heart brooch. A gift from Cameron. The brooch had belonged to Marcus's mother. Moisture had glistened in Cameron's eyes when he pinned it on her dress. Tears stung her eyes. What would Marcus's mother have thought of her son marrying a murderess? Elise slipped an arm beneath her pillow and hugged it close as she drifted off to dreams of ships tossed about by high winds, a child lost in the darkness, and a man who called from a place she couldn't distinguish.

* * * *

"Quiet, lads." Marcus slapped Declan's shoulder. He rode atop the shoulders of Declan and Kiernan. "Ye are sure to wake the dead."

Declan pretended to misstep, jostling him. Marcus grasped Declan's shoulder.

"Don't make me fetch my sword and deal with you," Marcus laughed.

The procession of men stopped before the new lady's bedchambers. Declan kicked open the door. It hit the wall with a resounding bang and Elise bolted upright with a small cry. She blinked against the soft light of the candle illuminating her nightstand. At the sight of disheveled brown locks cascading down her shoulders and over the creamy rise of her breasts, Marcus's groin tightened. She looked from him to Declan. When her gaze came to Kiernan, her eyes widened and she snatched the sheet up to her chin.

Probably best, Marcus realized. Kiernan was no threat, but a

band of drunken Highlanders barred the only exit. He bit back a laugh when her attention shifted to the top of his head where, earlier, had sat the now-missing bonnet. Her gaze traveled downward, her eyes narrowing when they reached the missing shirt buttons—a shirt open to his navel and only half tucked into a kilt, which looked as though it might come unpleated with a brisk sneeze.

Her gaze lifted to his face. "Is there something you want, milord?"

Guffaws followed, along with several straightforward answers to her query. Marcus noted her chagrin in the form of pink cheeks. He patted Kiernan's and Declan's shoulders. They lowered him to the floor while Declan added his compliments upon Marcus's wisdom if he heeded their advice. The request they be allowed to remain followed as Elise's attention settled on Declan. Marcus glanced at Declan, who winked at her, and Marcus knew Declan was extracting a bit of revenge for the cuff with the frying pan.

"We have brought your new lord to you, lass," Declan said, his deep voice resonating above the general commotion. "He's a wee bit worn, but you need not worry. He'll have no trouble wielding his sword for you tonight."

The men fairly shook with raucous laughter. Elise gave a ladylike sniff, but Declan gave no evidence of noticing the cool look she sent his way.

She gave Marcus an appraising glance, then addressed Declan. "He looks worse for the wear. I suggest you put him in his own chambers. I have no need of a husband who is useless."

The men succumbed to more uproarious laughter. All, that is, except Marcus. He stepped forward and, heedless of her sudden cry and valiant attempt to keep the sheet wrapped around herself, pulled her to him.

"I assure you, sweet, I am quite fit for tonight's activities."

Whoops of approval went up as he kissed her quick and hard. With a jerk of his head, he cleared the room, never breaking eye contact with his wife. Finally, when everyone had gone and the last of the suggestions and general advice had faded from the room, Marcus released her. He stepped back and appraised her. She kneeled half naked on the bed, hair tousled as he remembered it on those occasions she had allowed him into her bed.

He wondered if she thought he wouldn't come to her, then noticed the sleeves of the filmy pale robe and night shift she wore. A gift from Sophie, no doubt. Did the wearing of the gift indicate his new wife anticipated his coming? She had uttered not a word about the discovery of his title, but she had married him. Was *that* enough? Had she forgiven him?

Marcus hadn't pressed her, fearing he would further tip the scales in his disfavor. She had gone about the business of the wedding as any bride might—any bride who considered marriage a business, that is. She had surprised him, unexpectedly joining him and his men yesterday when they went to the village. She had, when he'd made the mistake of addressing her familiarly, looked as though she would bolt for the castle. The look on her face then, he realized, wasn't so dissimilar from the look she wore now.

"Have you come to fear me so?" he asked. When she made no reply, he added, "You married me, Elise, knowing who I am."

She tilted her head as though to read his thoughts. His body pulsed. A wary look entered her eyes and he could have sworn she *had* read his mind.

"I have spent many nights in your bed," he said, adding in a husky voice, "Though, not nearly enough. Tonight and every night hereafter, you will be in *my* bed."

He waited for no response—needed no response—other than the reaction he would get when her body responded to his—and scooped her into his arms. She gave a surprised cry.

So, she was no mind reader, after all.

Marcus strode through the connecting closet into his room. He stopped before the massive bed. Her gaze shifted to the bed, then moved across her new surroundings. Her attention lingered on the fire burning in the hearth, then flicked upward to the sword which hung over the mantel.

Elise abruptly looked at him, seeming to have forgotten she lay in his arms. He kissed her. She wriggled as if to slip through the miniscule space between his arms and chest. Marcus flicked his tongue into her mouth, mimicking the motion he would soon replicate inside her body. She stilled, and he wondered if she was envisioning the same action.

At last, he broke the kiss. He scrutinized her face until her gaze fell to his chest. Slowly, he lowered her feet to the carpeted floor. He pushed the robe and night rail from her shoulders. His gaze followed the slither of their descent until they struck the floor.

Marcus tipped her head up until she faced him and whispered, "Touch me."

Elise didn't move, didn't blink, and he held his breath.

She shifted, only minutely at first, then lifted a hand to finger the topmost button still intact on his shirt. She reached with the other hand and unbuttoned the button, then the next, then the last. Her gaze remained focused on his chest. Marcus stifled heavy breaths when she slipped her hands inside his shirt and slid them up and over his shoulders. He dropped his arms to his sides, allowing the shirt to fall

to the floor.

Her hands glided down his chest. Ripples of pleasure radiated through him. He hardened more with each inch she descended. She stopped with her fingers clasped around his belt. She slipped the leather from its loop. The clasp clinked in the silence of the room as she unfastened it. The plaid loosened and dropped into a pile at his feet. She didn't move, and he realized her gaze was fixed on the jutting, hard length of him. He didn't move—wasn't about to move. She could stare at him all night and, knowing her eyes were on him, he could maintain his arousal until she tired of the sight. Her gaze did move, though, back to his chest where she placed her palms.

"You're so hard," she said, as though marveling at something she hadn't the slightest notion could have been.

Marcus choked back a groan. He backed her against the bed and she fell onto the mattress. He scooted her farther up onto the bed, then rose over her, holding his body inches above her. He gently kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose, her eyelids, cheeks, mouth. Here he lingered, rocking his hips against her in light motions as he drew the kiss out. Elise ran her hands along his back, hesitating at the curve of his buttocks.

"Aye, love," he whispered, placing small kisses at the corner of her mouth, then along her neck. "Touch me as you like."

He rocked again and, this time, her hands continued around and over the curve of his buttocks. Marcus groaned as he took a nipple between his lips. He gently parted her legs with a knee, then eased into her. He moved slowly, drawing out her pleasure. He suckled one breast, then the other until, at last, her fingers tightened on the tensed muscles of his buttocks. He quickened his movements. An instant later, she cried out softly and lifted her hips to meet his movements. Another instant, and he emptied into her. He waited until the throb of his body ceased, then hugged her close and slid to her side.

* * * *

Elise relaxed against the carriage's cushion. She closed her eyes, allowing the motion of the carriage to lull her. The journey from Brahan Seer to the lowlands had been easier than expected. The stop at the Green Lady Inn earlier that morning had divided a tedious eight-hour ride into two, more comfortable, four-hour portions. Now, less than two hours from Ashlund, they would first stop at Sophie's estate.

She opened her eyes and looked out the window at Marcus, who rode alongside the carriage. He sat, as always, easy in the saddle. There had been little time to think of him today. Sophie had kept her

distracted with plans for Ashlund and the visits they would make to the *modiste*, as well as a number of other merchants, who were sure to provide what Sophie said she needed to fulfill her role as the new Marchioness of Ashlund.

A tremor ran through her. She shifted her attention to him. Without Sophie's monologue filling her head with visions of jewels and bolts of rich fabrics, and without Mary's enthusiastic contributions as to which dresses and jewelry Elise should wear to the parties, she couldn't deny she was, completely and fully, Elise MacGregor, Marchioness of Ashlund.

Her body warmed. There had been no denying that fact last night when Marcus had bedded her for the first time as his wife. She slid her gaze down his body to the muscled calf visible between kilt and boot. The memory of his thighs between her legs last night, then again this morning, dried her throat. She swallowed. Her throat moistened, but her heart beat faster as if in rhythm with his thrusts when he brought her to climax. How many nights such as that lay ahead of her? Was it possible they could live in peace? Could she could make him happy?

"He is a fine male specimen," Sophie said.

Elise jerked her gaze to Sophie, who regarded her from her seat in the far corner. Mary gave a titter of laughter, and Elise scowled. "You must make some people very nervous, Sophie."

"I do, indeed," the countess replied without hesitation. "I am pleased Marcus agreed to stop at Whycham House. You need a rest and I so want you to meet Justin."

"I'm glad as well," Elise said.

The carriage rounded a bend in the road and a rider became visible in the distance. Marcus kicked his horse and galloped to meet the rider. An instant later, Kiernan's horse passed the carriage at a gallop as he, too, sped to intercept the rider.

"What's happened?" Sophie demanded.

"A rider," Elise replied, without taking her eyes off Marcus.

Sophie moved from her side of the coach to sit beside her. Sophie leaned close and they watched as the man stopped and Marcus pulled his stallion to a halt beside him. Kiernan joined them a moment later. They spoke, then Marcus and the man whirled their horses in the direction the man had come and Kiernan spurred his horse back toward the carriage. The carriage halted as Kiernan arrived.

"What is it?" Elise demanded.

"A fire at Ashlund."

Both women gasped.

"It's the stables," Kiernan called. "The horses are safe, but there's been a casualty. My father and Jeremy are riding ahead. I will see you

to Whycham House, then follow."

"We are nearly to Whycham House," Sophie said. "You needn't accompany us the rest of the way."

Kiernan shook his head. "Father instructed me to see you safely there." He shouted at the driver to move on.

The coach lurched into motion. Kiernan urged his horse to precede the coach and, twenty minutes later, they arrived at Whycham House. Kiernan waited only until the coach passed through the gates, then whirled his horse before Elise could ask any questions. She emerged from the carriage, her gaze following the boy as he disappeared from sight down the road.

"Don't worry." Sophie rested a hand on Elise's arm. "They know how to deal with such matters."

"But we don't know a thing about what has happened."

"Come along, Mary," Sophie instructed the maid as she hooked her arm through Elise's and started up the walkway of the imposing mansion. "Trust them to deal with the fire." Sophie led Elise across the threshold and into the foyer.

Elise tossed her riding vest onto the bed and crossed to the chair nearest the window as Mary closed the bedchamber door behind them when Sophie left.

"Now, there must be some water here somewhere," Mary said, as she glanced around the room. "There it is." She hurried across the room to the dresser.

Elise seated herself in the chair and bent to unlace her boots. "Freshen yourself first," she said. "I'll rest a few minutes then see to myself."

"I canna' do that," Mary exclaimed. She poured water from the pitcher into the bowl it sat in. "The laird would be displeased."

"The *laird* isn't here to care," Elise replied. She wondered if Marcus had reached Ashlund yet. The estate lay another hour and a half away by carriage. A fast horse could have gotten him there in half the time.

"Aye," the girl replied with a deep sigh. "It must be difficult for you considering the danger." Mary took a step back and surveyed the dresser drawers. She opened the top right drawer. "Oh, fine," she said, and pulled out a washcloth.

"By the time they arrive to Ashlund, the fire may be out," Elise said.

"Mayhap," Mary said. She dipped the cloth in the water and wrung it out. "Just pray the main house doesna' catch fire in the process."

Elise straightened from her boot. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to Ashlund," Elise announced an hour later as she entered the drawing room.

Sophie looked up from the tea she was pouring. "Marcus said you were to stay here." She set the teapot down.

"He did not." Elise stopped in front of her. "Kiernan simply escorted us here so he could hurry to Ashlund."

"You know he intended for you to remain here."

"He probably thought I would be more comfortable here and that I might not want to arrive at Ashlund under such circumstances. Had we discussed the matter, I would have explained none of those things mattered."

Had Marcus told her the grove that separated the stables from the house had burned once before, nearly taking the house with it, he wouldn't have been able to keep her away. Winnie's story of how her uncle had burned while asleep in his house came back to Elise with the same horrifying realism it had when Mary described how the grove burned thirty years ago.

"Why the concern?" Elise said when the furrows in Sophie's forehead deepened. "Daylight will last another two hours. I can reach Ashlund long before dark. I will take the driver, along with the men Marcus assigned to accompany us." Sophie still looked doubtful and Elise added, "Along with two of your men, they can help with the fire."

"Three of our men," she said. "Keep them as long as Marcus needs them. Perhaps I should send more? Oh dear, I should have thought of that earlier. I wish Justin were here. He would deal with this far better than I." She looked at Elise, adding in a hopeful voice, "He should be returning any moment."

"We have all the time in the world to get to know one another," Elise said. "Now, let's have the carriage readied."

* * * *

Marcus slowed his stallion as he neared the stables at Whycham House. The boy Samuel emerged from the stables and Marcus came to a halt beside him. Marcus dismounted and tossed the reins to him.

"See to him, Samuel," he said, and started for the house.

He hurried along the footpath. Despite exhaustion last night, he had missed Elise. He entered without knocking and went directly to the drawing room where, as expected, Sophie sat on the couch facing the window overlooking the gardens. Elise, however, wasn't present.

Sophie looked up. Her brow furrowed. "What is amiss?"

"The only thing amiss," he replied, "is that my wife isn't here. Is

she still abed? It is nearly—"

Sophie's eyes widened and she gave a soft gasp.

Marcus felt an instant of confusion, then his heart leapt into a furious rhythm. "What is it? Where is she?"

Sophie stood, the needlework in her lap falling to the floor. "She left yesterday, a short time after we arrived."

"What?" Marcus's head spun. "I instructed her to wait until I came for her." He broke from the cold hand of fear and strode to Sophie. She looked up at him, panic on her face. He grasped her shoulders. "Why did Justin allow her to leave?"

"He wasn't here. Elise was concerned about you."

"And you let her go?" Marcus shook her hard enough to loosen several hairpins. Two curls struck her shoulder.

"It was still light," Sophie said, her voice so shaky Marcus realized she was close to tears. "I travel between Whycham House and Ashlund often. Marcus!" Tears streamed down her cheeks. "You know it is true. I have never feared traveling on that road, even at night."

Marcus released her, his hands working and reworking into fists.

"She took three of our men," Sophie went on. "I told her to keep them as long as needed at Ashlund. It was early. I had no reason to—"

"No reason to think!" he roared, and stepped closer. She didn't retreat. "She is not to travel alone," he shouted. "There have been threats—"

"Threats?" Sophie's gaze hardened. "Threats you say? I ask you, then, why we weren't told? Should Justin not have been informed? Should not some provisions have been made? My God, Marcus, why have you kept silent?"

He struggled to answer, but the words—his mind—nothing worked.

"What are these threats?" Sophie asked in a voice so reasonable, so firm, Marcus snapped from his indecision.

"There's no time for explanations." Sophie opened her mouth to speak, but he said, "First, we find her."

Chapter Seventeen

Marcus followed Elise's carriage tracks from Whycham House onto the road leading to Ashlund. Where a heavier-trafficked crossroad joined the Ashlund road, a myriad of tracks, all muddied by the night's rain, obscured hers. Marcus ordered Justin to return to Whycham House and check all farms and cottages near the road, while he continued onward and did the same. Two hours passed before he heard the pounding of hooves over the sound of his own mount's gallop. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Justin approaching. Sophie rode alongside and Kiernan followed with a dozen more men behind. Marcus slowed his stallion as they neared. He observed the haggard look on Sophie's face when they came alongside.

They had discovered no news.

"There are four farms between the point you left us and Whycham House," Justin said. "I did not wish to diverge too far off the road until we could better ascertain where she might have gotten lost."

Marcus's head jerked to the side and he glared at Justin. "Lost?"

"You have found nothing?" Justin went on.

Marcus looked forward again. "Nay."

"We are but midway between Ashlund and Whycham House," Justin said. "There is much territory yet to cover."

Two farmhouses down, they encountered a peasant who remembered Elise's entourage.

"When?" Marcus demanded.

"Yesterday," the man replied. "I was returning from MacLellan's down the road. Later afternoon, four-thirty or five, I would say."

"All was well with her?"

"As far as I could see."

"How many were in the party?" Marcus asked.

"I didn't see inside the carriage. Let me see, there was the driver, wheeler," he paused, then added, "there were three or four men riding alongside. Can't say for sure."

"Sounds as if the men are accounted for," Justin said.

"Come," Marcus directed the man, "you will show us exactly where you saw my wife."

They rode a mile south on the road, when the farmer stopped them. "Here."

Marcus dismounted and examined the tracks. "Bloody hell," he cursed. "It looks as though all of Edinburgh has traversed this road." He tried following his line of sight along one set of carriage tracks,

only to lose them in the tangled web of another in the moist ground.

"Lord Phillip passed this way," the man said.

Marcus cut his gaze to the man. "Lord Phillip. When?"

"I passed him about two miles north of his estate," the man replied.

"Then you saw Lady Ashlund here?"

"Aye."

Marcus looked at Justin. "Phillip's estate borders mine."

Justin nodded. "Perhaps they passed one another."

An hour later, Marcus departed Lord Phillip's estate knowing nothing more than that the earl had set out to visit a friend to the north before heading south for Edinburgh. Marcus cursed the earl's timing, his absence, and his person.

Marcus glanced at the sky as he mounted his horse. The day had turned to dusk. He had ridden since morning and his mount flagged. He rode to Ashlund and exchanged his horse for a fresh one. He reached the outskirts of Ashlund property and encountered the search party.

"Exchange your horses for fresh ones at Ashlund," Marcus instructed. "I'll speak to the tenants of the two farms to the south."

"Father," Kiernan said in unison with Justin's, "Marcus."

"I left instructions for horses to be readied for you," Marcus said. "You will overtake me soon enough."

* * * *

Dusk gave way to night as they extended the search into the countryside to the west. To the east, a high cliff butted the shoreline of an inlet from the bay. Now, they rode fifteen miles south of Ashlund, stopping at every village and home on the road to Edinburgh. The next village lay five miles farther south. Marcus urged his horse into a harder trot and the company following did the same. Sophie rode between Marcus and Justin with Kiernan behind them.

"Marcus," Sophie called above the clatter of hooves.

He looked at her. An overcast sky hid the moon, but four of the twelve men who accompanied them carried torches and he easily made out her strained expression.

Sophie shook her head. "Why didn't Elise—" She broke off with a stifled choke.

Marcus looked straight ahead. "I alone bear the blame. Don't cause yourself any further grief over the matter."

"No further grief?"

Her words hit him like barbs and Marcus snapped his attention onto her.

Her eyes blazed. "You can be an arrogant bastard, Cousin. Whether or not I share blame, I will grieve as I please."

She yanked her horse's reins and Marcus pulled to the right in order to avoid her horse. She circled to the rear of the company and brought her stallion alongside Justin's.

A moment of silence passed before Justin said, "Seven men traveled in the company, all trained men of war. Not easy prey."

"Yet they are gone," Marcus said.

"True," Justin agreed, "but there will be news of them somewhere. A company of brigands large enough to take such a large party could not go unnoticed."

"Then let us find that news," Marcus said, and spurred his mount into a full gallop.

The morning sun had only begun to spread across the grey sky when Marcus brought his horse to a halt in front of Ashlund. Justin, Kiernan, and the messenger, carrying news of a priest who said he had knowledge of Elise's entourage, followed Marcus as he jumped to the ground and ran for the porch, then took the stairs two at a time. Pushing past the oak door, they strode down the corridor to the drawing room. Marcus threw open the door to find Sophie sitting on the couch. Beside her sat the priest, Father Fynn.

The priest stood and Marcus hurried forward. "Father," he said, "what news do you have?"

The priest hesitated.

"Tell me," Marcus demanded. "You have news of my wife."

"Forgive me, Lord Ashlund," Father Fynn began, "Yesterday, we found a woman's body washed ashore near Braemer."

Marcus's head reeled. He looked at Sophie, who had yet to rise. He turned back to the priest. "You can't be sure. We found no sign of foul play."

"Lord Ashlund, I wasn't aware you had married, and this woman was a stranger to us. Therefore, we began a search of our own. We traveled upstream and—" he broke off.

"What? What did you find that could possibly confirm your suspicions?"

"A carriage."

Marcus stared. "A carriage means nothing."

"I know the crest. All living in this area know it." Father Fynn pointed at the two-sworded crest hanging over the hearth. "The carriage bore your crest. It lies on the shore near Glenurcom."

Forty-five minutes later, Marcus stood with Justin and Kiernan at the edge of a wooded cliff overlooking Glenurcom. He looked down at a carriage, the front half of which was submerged in water. The

horses' bodies were tangled in the mass of leather and iron, which had once been harness and axle. Marcus watched small waves lap at the bloated mass of flesh. He stared again at the broken carriage, then closed his eyes. Even from a hundred-foot distance, there was no mistaking the Ashlund crest.

He turned away.

Justin followed. "You say you found another woman's body in the carriage?" he addressed the priest, who had remained astride his mount.

Father Fynn nodded. "Young. By her dress, I assumed a servant."

"Mary," Marcus mumbled.

"And you found the bodies of how many men?" Justin asked.

"Four."

"How many men had you left with her, Marcus?"

He laughed bitterly. "Not enough."

"How many?" Justin repeated.

Marcus looked up, startled from his stupor by the earl's sharp tone. "Four. The driver, two wheelers and one guard. Kiernan rode with them. They were but twenty minutes from Whycham House—" He ceased speaking when Kiernan's mouth tightened. "'Tis not your fault, Kiernan. You saw them to Whycham House as I instructed."

"Three men are missing," Justin went on in a business-like manner. "Where are they?"

Marcus looked at him. He heard the words, but the meaning escaped him. "What?"

"Three men remain unaccounted for."

"You know full well where they are," Marcus said in a savage voice. "They ran from my wrath. And well they should. But they can't hide from me forever. When I catch them—"

"Don't be a fool," Justin cut in, his voice still calm. "There isn't a man in your personal entourage who would run rather than die. As for the three men from my household, I've trusted them with Sophie's life many times."

Justin began looking about the rocky terrain of the forest. He strode ten feet, then came to a halt. He studied the ground for a moment before saying, "The carriage came through here." With a sweep of his hands, he indicated a wide area between the trees. "I see only this bit of carriage tracks here," he squatted and ran a finger over two inches of ground, "and," he scuttled forward, "this here." He ran his fingers over another four inches of ground.

Marcus looked at the ground, but the imagined picture of Elise's terror-stricken face as the carriage careened through the forest toward the cliff's edge blurred his vision. He watched numbly as Justin rose,

walked another twenty feet in the direction of the road, then stopped again.

He dropped to a squat and examined the ground. "Here is a hoof print." He lightly touched a mossy spot between embedded stones. "This stony ground challenges my limited skills as tracker."

Father Fynn dismounted and joined Justin in studying the ground. He glanced toward the road, then rose, strode several paces, and studied the ground. "Two rode here." The priest pointed to the ground a foot away.

Justin rose and walked another ten feet past the priest. He surveyed the ground, then the cliff. He looked at Marcus. "Why didn't the women jump?"

Marcus's stomach lurched.

Justin frowned. "The guards would have instructed them to jump long before they reached the cliff. The men wouldn't have willingly gone over with the carriage." Justin turned and walked toward the road until he disappeared among the trees. A moment later, his faint call sounded from beyond the trees.

Marcus didn't move.

"Father," Kiernan said.

Marcus looked at him and Keirnan gave him an inquiring look. Marcus started toward Justin's voice. He broke from the trees to find Justin examining the road. Father Fynn followed, his horse's reins in hand. Kiernan trailed with the remaining horses.

Justin didn't look up at their approach, only said, "Marcus, you are a far better tracker than I. Have a look."

Marcus moved forward as though in a dream and squatted next to Justin.

"This road is nearly as rocky as the shore," Justin said. "However, there is no mistaking these tracks."

Marcus looked at the inch long depression crushing the moss which grew between the rocks.

"And," Justin went on, "these." He pointed to another small rut to his right.

Marcus looked at the track. He frowned and looked up at Justin. "A second carriage"

The earl nodded. "Have you any idea if this could be Elise's carriage?"

Marcus looked from one carriage track to the other, then back at Justin. "Nay."

"They are two separate tracks, then?"

"Aye. They are spaced too far apart to be the same carriage." He surveyed the ground. "This road isn't used a great deal." The road branched off the main road to Edinburgh. He looked at Father Fynn.

"This is the road you took from Braemer?"

"Aye," the priest answered.

"We found no sign of the carriage leaving the main road," Marcus said.

"True," Justin agreed. "But the rain the night before obliterated most tracks."

Marcus rose and stepped slowly toward the trees, all the while scanning the ground. When he saw the partial indentation of a hoof print, he looked up and stared at the trees through which Elise's carriage had raced.

"Kiernan," he called without looking back, "bring me my horse."

* * * *

"Wait here," Marcus told Justin and Kiernan when they followed him down the chapel hallway. They had remained close—too close—on the ride to the church, and Marcus had no stomach for it when he faced what lie ahead.

They obeyed, and he continued to the door that separated him from the body of the woman Father Fynn insisted was his wife. Marcus reached for the door, his hand shaking so badly he gripped the doorknob with force enough to turn his knuckles white. He pushed the door open, stepped through, then shoved it shut behind him.

In the time it took to slide his gaze from the floor to her body, the memory of Elise turning to face him the day he'd happened upon her in the meadow flashed before him. Burned into his mind was the proud expression that revealed the indomitable spirit that would not be tamed.

The memory shattered at sight of the body lying on the small bed in the corner of the room. He reeled. Father Fynn warned that her skull had been damaged beyond recognition, but nothing had prepared Marcus for this. His belly roiled. He fell to his knees, his stomach finally giving up what little he had been coerced into eating the past two days. He wretched until he thought his liver would follow, then slumped forward.

A sudden pounding on the door jarred him. "Father!" Kiernan called from the other side of the door.

Amidst the pounding came Justin's calmer, "Marcus."

"Stay out!" Marcus shouted.

He leaned forward, his palms finding purchase on the floor amidst the vomit. The pounding ceased. Marcus slowed his ragged breathing, but no amount of effort controlled the shaking of his body. He forced his head up, steadying his gaze on Elise's skirts, torn and mud-caked. He recognized the light yellow damask. His gaze moved of

its own volition to her hands, folded across her chest in an attitude of rest. Without thought, his gaze yanked farther up her body and he stared at the unrecognizable face.

* * * *

Marcus jerked to consciousness as though roused from a slumber of years. Daylight had faded the sky to a purple haze. He rode between Justin and Kiernan. He searched his memory but found no recollection of how he had come to be there. He looked left, past Kiernan, and studied the forested land. There was something—something he couldn't quite grasp. He looked ahead at the road, damp from the day's shower. The recollection hit him like a bolt of lightning. He couldn't mistake the place. Marcus yanked on his horse's reins, wheeling the beast past Kiernan.

"Father!"

Marcus ignored his son and galloped through the trees toward the spot where Elise's carriage had run off the cliff. Hoof beats followed, but he cared nothing for his companions. He broke from the trees into the clearing at the cliff's edge and brought his horse to a halt ten feet from the cliff. Marcus leapt from its back and strode to the very edge of the cliff.

"Father!" Kiernan's shout preceded his burst into the clearing.

Marcus whirled. "Her wedding band."

"What?" Kiernan said, breathless as he jumped from his horse and hurried to his side.

Marcus looked past him to Justin, who was dismounting. "I didn't see her wedding ring. Did the priest give it to you?"

"No," Justin replied.

Marcus tightened his jaw as he pushed past Kiernan. "What have they done with her wedding band?"

Justin strode to his side. "The highwaymen would have taken everything."

Marcus shook his head. "Nay. The ring was a size too large. She feared losing it and packed it away for the trip."

The earl shook his head. "Surely the highwaymen would have searched the baggage."

"The emerald is three karats. It will not be easily hid. I can find it *and* Elise's murderers within the week."

For the second time that day, Marcus rode through the streets of Braemer. Elise's body was already on its way to Brahan Seer. Justin had made the arrangements. Marcus's gut twisted. He would retrieve her wedding band, find the guards who had deserted her, then return

to Brahan Seer… and to her. He could offer no recompense for her death, but neither would he find peace for the remainder of his days. He stopped in front of the modest church.

"Wait here," he ordered Kiernan and Justin, then dismounted and went inside.

Father Fynn walked down the aisle toward the door. He halted when Marcus entered the sanctuary. They stared at one another for a moment, then the priest said, "You're here about the jewelry?"

Marcus felt another vicious twist to his insides. "Aye."

Father Fynn nodded. "Come with me." He turned and started toward the altar.

Marcus followed him to the back of the church. He hesitated when the priest paused before the altar to make the sign of the cross. Left led to the room where Elise had lain. Father Fynn turned right, but Marcus's knees weakened nonetheless. They continued down a short corridor and entered a modest bedchamber. Father Fynn stopped before a desk in the far corner and opened a drawer. He retrieved a folded paper, then faced Marcus.

"I wanted no mistakes. When I saw the quality cut of Lady Ashlund's clothes, I assumed she had met with highwaymen. Therefore, the fact she wore no jewelry did no' surprise me. I thought no more of it until Sara MacPhee, one of my parishioners, arrived early this morning. According to her, her son discovered your wife. I didn't know that when I spoke to you earlier because it was James MacAlphie who alerted me to the presence of Lady's Ashlund's body in the loch." Father Fynn paused. "You must understand, the jewels represent a lifetime of wealth to these people." Marcus made no response and Fynn went on. "The long and short of the matter is that Sara's son took the jewelry."

Marcus clenched his hands into fists.

"The boy is gone. You could find him, of course, and would be well within your rights to extract payment. A man of your position could sentence the boy to a lifetime of imprisonment."

Marcus envisioned the boy hanging alongside the three men who had been entrusted with Elise's life.

Father Fynn unfolded the paper. "Sara saw the jewelry. She described a thin, gold bracelet and a brooch—"

"I am well aware of my wife's jewelry," Marcus snapped.

He strode to Father Fynn and snatched the paper from his hands.

"Of course." Father Fynn hesitated. "Lord Ashlund, I pressed Sara for information concerning the brooch. It was the most valuable of the items, so I had hoped—"

"Most valuable?" Marcus demanded coldly. "My wife's wedding

ring was far more valuable. The emerald is three karats. The gold, twenty-four karat. The ring has been in my family for generations. It is priceless."

Father Fynn looked startled. "Emerald? What emerald?"

"She packed the ring in her valise *with* the chain and brooch."

The priest pointed to the paper Marcus held. "I swear, Lord Ashlund, there was no emerald ring. Wait, there is this." He opened a drawer and withdrew a folded sheet of paper. He unfolded the document and handed it to Marcus.

He lifted the paper and recognized the pawnbroker's ticket for Elise's wedding band.

Thick gold wedding band his mind repeated the words on the document. Elise had kept the pawn ticket. Why?

Marcus riveted his gaze to Father Fynn. "Where is this Sara MacPhee?"

Fear crossed the priest's face.

"I will not harm her."

Father Fynn hesitated, then said, "I cannot stop you."

"No," Marcus said, his voice hard. "No one can."

* * * *

In the predawn hours the next morning, the door to Marcus's study opened and Justin and Kiernan entered. The time of reckoning had arrived.

"Justin," Marcus said, without shifting his attention from the instructions he was preparing for Harris, "go home."

"Father," Kiernan said, forcing Marcus's attention to the chair Justin was settling into and his son standing beside it.

Marcus met Kiernan's gaze and he saw the pain on his face, but only broke the connection saying, "You will return to school."

"I will stay."

"Staying will not stop me." He looked at Justin. "Nor yours."

"*I will not leave*," Kiernan asserted.

Marcus swung his attention onto his son. "You *will* return to school. Refuse, and I will have you bound and taken back to Brahan Seer, where you will remain until I return."

"If you return," Kiernan shot back.

"You are old enough to understand—"

"Old enough to understand a fool's errand when I see one."

"The boy deserves an explanation," Justin said.

Marcus stared at his son, then looked at Justin. This was the first the two of them had demanded an explanation for his actions of the previous evening. He understood that he might appear insane.

When he'd left the church in search of Sara MacPhee, he hadn't commanded them to leave, but neither had he explained the hurried ride to her home, nor the search of the immediate area when her cottage was found empty.

No words were spoken on the return trip home and Justin and Kiernan didn't accost him when he closeted himself in his study the length of the night. They knew nothing of what he'd read in the preliminary report entitled "Elisabeth Kingston" that had sat on his desk until last night. *Kingston.* At last, he knew her name. Marcus closed his eyes. *Why did you not tell me, Elise?* Too late, he knew her identity and why she was in the Scottish Highlands.

The daughter of a wealthy shipping baron, Elise had lost her father at age fifteen. She was now thirty—older than he'd thought. She married Robert Kingston—not Riley, as she had called him—seven years ago. Amelia Kingston had been born a year after the marriage. Amelia died aboard the ship that bore her name. Robert, too, had died. Only, he hadn't drowned in the wreckage of the ship but had been brought down by a bullet administered by his wife. Marcus's wife, the Marchioness of Ashlund, was wanted for murder. What pushed a woman to murder her husband?

Marcus's man of affairs had attempted to find the *Amelia's* captain to answer that question, but ship and captain were on an extended voyage to Australia and wouldn't return for six more months. He'd located only one crewmember who had been aboard the *Amelia* on that voyage. The crewmember told of a nasty storm that had raged the night Elise had been lost at sea. Robert appeared on deck during the storm. He had a pistol, but before he could use it, Elise shot him. He returned fire as he fell. Steven was hit, but not mortally wounded. Elise had told him Steven went down with the ship. She must have believed Steven dead by her husband's bullet.

A massive wave struck the ship and swept Elise overboard. Everyone in America thought her dead, which didn't explain the notice advertised by her stepfather, Price Ardsley, that named her murderer. The investigator included in his report the rumor that Price Ardsley was unhappy with the twenty-five percent interest in Landen Shipping, which had fallen to Elise on her twenty-fifth birthday. If not for the twenty-six percent her brother controlled in Landen Shipping, her interest would be of small consequence to Price Ardsley.

The *Amelia* never docked in London, but did arrive back in Boston three weeks later. Two months ago, another ship owned by Landen Shipping arrived in the southern dock at Rotherhithe, Scotland. Price Ardsley had been aboard the ship.

Marcus picked up the envelope that contained the report on Elise and tossed it to Justin. He caught it and they made eye contact.

"You have one hour." Marcus looked at Kiernan. "Then I leave for Glasgow."

* * * *

Marcus paused on the boardwalk outside the shabby pawnbroker's shop and scanned the dock. Despite the early hour, hackneys passed in both directions on the street beside him and Justin, and sailors strode along the walkways, while others loaded and unloaded supplies and goods. A woman, likely one of the notoriously dishonest public house landlords the riverside teemed with or one of the brothel madams, hurried across the road. This was the neighborhood Elise had been in when Daniel found her. Marcus shuddered at what could have happened to her, then remembered what *had* happened to her less than half an hour from Ashlund.

"Are you all right?" Justin asked.

Marcus nodded, then entered the shop. A small man stood behind the counter in the rear of the room, his back to them as he examined an item Marcus assumed belonged to the man who stood on the other side of the counter. The man behind the counter turned. His gaze fell first on Marcus, then flicked to Justin and returned to Marcus. His eyes widened. Marcus glanced at the gold pocket watch the man clutched before the hand disappeared behind his back. Marcus strode toward the man with Justin following. The customer turned. He didn't step aside as they stopped beside him, only scrutinized Justin, who stood closest.

"Do we know one another?" Justin asked with a lift of his brow.

The man gave a rough laugh. "Nay, canna' say I've had the pleasure."

Justin turned to the man behind the counter. "Are you the proprietor, sir?"

The man shifted uneasily. "I dinna' know as I'd say the proprietor."

"What are ye talking about, Jack?" the customer cut in. "You owned this shop your whole life. Got it from your dad."

"Bart," Jack growled, "mind your business." Jack scurried toward the far end of the counter. He flipped a section of the counter up, passed through, and hurried toward Bart. Jack pressed the watch into his hand. "Be on your way," he growled, and shoved Bart toward the door.

"Now, see here," Bart began, but halted when his gaze met Marcus's. He looked from Marcus to Justin. "Bloody gentry. Think they own the world." He continued grumbling as he shuffled toward the door.

The hustle and bustle of passing hackneys and men's shouts filled the room as he opened the door, then cut off abruptly when the door banged shut.

Jack hurried back behind his counter. He stopped across from Marcus and Justin. "Now, what can I do for you gentleman?"

From inside his jacket pocket, Marcus produced the pawn ticket for Elise's wedding band and placed it on the counter. "I am here about this ring."

The shop owner picked up the paper and began reading it. "Ahh, yes, I knew her husband would come for this one day. Yes, I did," he added as he scurried toward a curtained doorway in a corner behind the counter. "A fine piece of jewelry, this one. No' something a man is likely to be pleased about his wife selling." Jack paused, hand on the curtain and looked over his shoulder. "Your wife" He looked from Justin to Marcus. "Er, your wife, m'lord?"

Marcus nodded.

"I can see you have the situation well in hand." Jack disappeared behind the curtain.

A moment later, Jack burst through the curtain, a fragment of folded velvet in hand. He laid the fabric on the counter before Marcus and unwrapped it. Marcus stared at the gold band glistening against the black fabric.

"I—" he began.

"Well, there you are," Justin interrupted. "Just as you knew it would be." Justin looked at him. "That'll teach you something of a woman's wrath."

Marcus stared blankly at him.

Justin turned to Jack. "You know how women are."

"Oh, indeed, m'lord. Indeed, I do."

Justin produced a roll of banknotes from his pocket. "How much did you pay her?"

Jack picked up the paper. "Here it is." He pointed a bony finger at the figure scrawled in the bottom corner of the paper. "Five sovereign."

Justin counted out ten pound notes. "I trust this will account for your efforts."

Jack's eyes glittered. "Aye, m'lord. Indeed, it will, indeed, it will."

He snatched up the notes as though expecting Justin to change his mind and stuffed them into his pocket. He rewrapped the ring, then produced a small wooden box from beneath the counter and placed the ring inside. He looked at Marcus and extended the box toward him.

"There you go, m'lord. As good as new."

Marcus took the box.

"Good day to you," Justin said, and looked at Marcus. "Come along, my good fellow. You'd best get back and deal with this matter straight away."

Jack snickered, but Marcus paid no heed as he followed the earl out the door. Justin took a few steps on the walkway, then stopped, looking toward the east.

"What is it?" Marcus demanded, following his line of sight along the busy dock.

Justin looked in the opposite direction. "We left Kiernan hours ago. I expected him before this."

"He is on his way to London as I instructed."

Justin grunted. "You don't know your son as well as you might think."

"What matters is that he knows me. I will make good on my threat to have him bound and taken back to Brahan Seer."

"It doesn't matter if you threatened to dismember the boy, he will appear sooner or later. You should hope for sooner; that will allow you to keep him under your watchful eye."

Marcus didn't reply. Instead, he opened the box containing the ring and removed it from the velvet wrapping. His heartbeat raced. The ring had been given to Elise by another man, but it belonged to *her*—was once a part of her. He closed his fingers into a fist around the ring. The cold metal warmed within his grasp. If he held the only remaining part of her, he could once again hold her.

"There is much in her past," Marcus said to himself.

"You're thinking of Price Ardsley," Justin said.

Marcus looked up sharply. "He's here. Or was."

"There is something going on with him."

"Imagine if she one day demanded the twenty-five per cent interest in Landen Shipping."

"By God, Marcus," Justin exclaimed. "You're as rich as the devil himself and still landed yourself an heiress."

Marcus started.

"Bloody hell," Justin muttered. "Deem me the fool I am. The words were out of my mouth before my brain could catch up."

Marcus gave a tired smile. "An uncommon state of mind for you."

Justin sighed, then gave him a long look. "You are going to America, then?"

"You won't dissuade me."

Justin nodded. "It is only right her brother know what this Price Ardsley is made of."

"I owe her that much," Marcus replied. His mouth tightened.

"By now the body is buried. Aye," he said when his cousin opened his mouth to comment. "I should have been there."

"I can't blame you for being unable to bear seeing her lain in the ground."

Marcus gave a harsh laugh. "She will still be in the grave when I return."

Justin gazed at the ships in the harbor. "We had better see the harbormaster."

Marcus looked at him. "We? Nay, Justin. You aren't coming."

The earl started forward. "I would say his office is where we entered the docks."

Marcus hurried forward. Within arm's reach, he grasped Justin's shoulder and forced Justin to face him. "I didn't ask you to come."

His expression remained impassive. "Of course not."

"I will not have you risking your life."

"Will you have me bound and sent back to Whycham House?"

"By God," Marcus burst out, "if that's what it takes."

Mild amusement crossed Justin's face. "You know me even less than your son."

"Sophie will not allow this."

"I already sent Sophie word I would be accompanying you to America."

Marcus gaped.

"I'm not a complete fool," Justin said.

"She won't be pleased."

"She won't be pleased we left her behind." Justin began walking.

"Justin!" Marcus strode after him.

* * * *

The following morning, Marcus leaned against the railing of the *Sallinger*, absently fingering the wedding band in his trouser pocket. He stared across the harbor at the docks. The shouts of drivers in passing hackneys, dock workers, and merchants buying and selling wares faded into the background, replaced by a quiet whoosh as the brigantine skimmed through the water. Hearing footsteps behind him, he looked over his shoulder to see Justin approach.

"The captain has been kind enough to extend an invitation for breakfast," Justin said.

Marcus nodded. He glanced past the masts at the sun. Eleven years had passed since he'd last been outside Great Britain, fourteen since crossing the Atlantic. He squinted against the sunlight. A month from now, he would be seeing this same sun from Boston Harbor.

Only, it wouldn't be with Elise.

Chapter Eighteen

Marcus rolled onto Elise. The darkness prevented discerning even the outline of her face, but he heard her sigh. His chest pressed upon her breasts and she shifted, teasing him with a slight arch of her body. His heart beat fiercely, his body hard with an arousal that circumvented the disorientation clouding his mind. He yanked on her shift until he could spread her legs with a knee. He grasped her shoulders and, levering himself into position, thrust into her. With the first stroke, pleasure radiated through his body. Marcus pinned her against the mattress, each stroke increasing the deafening roar of blood through his veins.

Elise gasped. He lowered his full weight upon her, then rolled onto his back, keeping their bodies joined. Grasping the back of her knees, he slid them forward so that she straddled him. He gripped her waist and lifted her up until only the tip of his shaft remained inside her, then brought her down, up, down—she gripped his arms and he felt her weight shift as she threw her head back. He lifted her, slamming her onto him, faster, then faster, gripping her slim waist in a clasp that frightened him. Pleasure shot through him. He slammed her down harder. Arching to meet her—Marcus jerked awake, grasping the wet sheet covering his hips as he groaned. He continued to pump upwards for several strokes before slumping back onto the mattress.

His chest rose and fell in heavy gasps for several moments before his senses cleared enough to recognize the cabin that had held him captive for twenty-eight nights. Shafts of muted light streamed through the small glass skylights. His gut wrenched. Another dream. He closed his eyes. In his mind, he saw the flutter of Elise's eyelids when he brought her to her release. His shaft twitched. A muted shout overhead brought the sudden realization that the ship no longer rocked as it had while slicing through the Atlantic. Marcus yanked the sheet aside and jumped from bed. He strode the three paces to the door and stuck his head into the hallway.

"Lad," he called to a boy at the far end of the corridor, "where are we?"

The boy turned. "We're in Boston, sir. We've docked."

"Can you get me a messenger? I need a note delivered immediately."

"Aye, sir," the boy said. "I'll go if you like."

"Good lad," he said. "I'll have it ready in ten minutes."

* * * *

At five-fifty in the afternoon three days later, the door to the private dining room in the Boston Harbor Hotel opened and Marcus looked up from the glass of wine he had been staring at.

"A message for you, sir," the waiter said, and laid an envelope beside him on the table.

Marcus saw the return address from Colonel Shay. He tore open the letter and read.

My Dear Marcus,

I have only now received word concerning Steven Landen. The boy is a lieutenant in the US Army and functions as a tracker for them. As of three months ago, Lieutenant Landen was stationed with the 23rd Cavalry Division on the Tyger River in South Carolina. The Army is slow in updating its records; the boy may have been sent elsewhere in the meantime. I hope this information will suffice to connect you with him.

Another bit of news I know will interest you. My wife is acquainted with Mrs Charles Hampton, of the Burlington Hamptons. (No, I do not expect you to know them, but you may take my word that they are among the Boston elite.) Mrs Hampton remembers the calamity which struck the Amelia *on that fateful trip to England. Apparently, the story was widely discussed amongst Mrs Hampton's class, a class, as you know, far above my own station.*

My wife related to me the tale as told to her by Mrs Hampton as follows: When the Amelia *docked and her captain advised Price Ardsley of Elise Kingston's fate, he was grief-stricken. Your wife's brother, the young Lieutenant Landen, was seriously injured and went into forced convalescence for nearly three months. Even before his release from the hospital, he demanded a search be mounted for his sister. The demand was flatly refused, most notably by Ardsley, though the directors of Landen Shipping did agree. They believed that had Mrs Kingston survived, she would have returned to Boston.*

None of this surprises you, as I well know. There is, however, one piece of information I believe will. Steven Landen contends that the night Elise was lost at sea, he came upon Robert Kingston strangling her. Steven thwarted the murder attempt, and he and Elise escaped up to the deck.

Marcus stared, his gaze fixed on the words *he came upon Robert Kingston strangling her.* Elise's husband had tried to kill her. His chest tightened. This explained why she shot him. Marcus closed his eyes.

Elise, why didn't you tell me? He forced back the pain, opened his eyes, and refocused on the letter.

> *While they were on deck, Robert appeared. Elise shot her husband. Robert pulled a pistol from his pocket after she drew on him, and returned fire. Steven took the bullet he says was meant for his sister. When Steven regained consciousness, the captain informed him Elise had fallen overboard and that Steven had tried rescuing her by cutting down the longboat. Steven has no memory of this.*
>
> *Ardsley proposed that Robert Kingston wanted to eliminate Elise in order to claim her shares in Landen Shipping. Ardsley preached this philosophy with a depth of gravity that Mrs Hampton described as "'most admirable.'"*
>
> *I wish I could be of more service. Travel safely to South Carolina. I look forward to learning of your success when you return.*
>
> *Sincerely,*
> *Colonel Martin Shay*

"South Carolina," Marcus said in a low voice, but his mind still staggered with the picture of Robert Kingston strangling his wife—*my wife*, Marcus's mind shot back. Memory of her broken body after the carriage crash filled his mind.

The clock that hung on the wall near the door gonged. He jerked his gaze onto the clock, dispelling the bloody vision. Six o'clock. Justin would arrive any minute. Even as he folded the letter with expert precision and set it beside him on the table, the door opened and Justin entered. A waiter followed close behind. The waiter pulled Justin's chair out as he seated himself across from Marcus.

Justin lifted the wine bottle sitting on the table and poured the remainder of the wine into his glass. He handed the bottle to the waiter. "Another bottle, if you please, and…" He paused, then focused on Marcus. "No dinner yet?"

Marcus gave a slight shake of his head.

Justin turned to the waiter. "Have you any pigeon pie?"

The waiter looked horrified. "This is not a port tavern, sir."

Justin raised a brow. "Can you name a port tavern that serves pigeon pie? Never mind. You do have filet mignon?"

The waiter straightened. "Of course."

"Be kind enough to bring two then, along with whatever you Americans consider appropriate accompaniments." Justin reached for his wine, clearly dismissing him.

The waiter looked as though he would like to bludgeon Justin

with the wine bottle but turned stiffly and left the room.

Marcus leaned back in his chair. "You have a knack for condescension."

"Never say you think the fellow was right?"

"Not right," Marcus replied. "Simply not worth the time."

Justin snorted. "Had I not done it, you would have." Marcus started to reply, but stopped short at the gleam that appeared in Justin's eye. "Marcus, prepare yourself… she is alive."

Marcus's hand jerked, upsetting his glass. Wine spread across the linen tablecloth. Justin started, nearly tipping over his own glass.

"Bloody hell," Marcus cursed, and set the glass upright. He ignored the stain. "What are you talking about?"

"Three months ago, Ardsley announced that Elise had returned to America."

"Three months ago? But that was before we wed."

"Listen," Justin cut in, "there's a very interesting stipulation in her father's will. If Elise dies, a body must be presented as evidence, or five years must pass before Ardsley can take possession of her stock."

"How does that prove she's alive?"

"Ardsley claims to have her in a convalescent home."

Shock ricocheted through Marcus. "An insane asylum?"

"Yes."

His mind reeled. Elise, alive? And in an asylum. "'Tis not possible," he said in a hoarse voice.

"No?" Justin held his gaze. "For the past six months, Ardsley has been attempting to get Landen Shipping's board of directors to agree to a large loan he wants in order to expand the shipping company to include west coast trade. Many of the board members plan on retiring in the next few years and don't relish the idea of putting their life savings at risk. They have a date set three weeks from tomorrow to settle the matter."

"Ardsley needs Elise's twenty-five percent interest to control the vote," Marcus said in a near whisper.

"Fifty-one percent," Justin rejoined.

"What?"

"A year after Elise married, Steven Landen signed his interest in the company over to her."

"My God."

Justin's brows lifted. "It's rather late in the game for Ardsley to present Elise's *body*, don't you think?"

"An insane asylum," Marcus murmured. "If it is true…"

'*No Campbells, or anyone else, can harm you,'* he had told her. *'I can protect you.'* Wed only two days and he had utterly failed her.

"Marcus." Justin's sharp voice cut into the picture of Elise

huddled in a tiny filthy cell, hands clamped over her ears to drown out the screams of the other inmates.

"I saw her body," Marcus said. "If that wasn't Elise, then who—"

Justin's mouth thinned. "That is a mystery to be solved—but not one we cannot solve from here. Agreed?"

Marcus stared. "Aye."

"What have you learned of Steven?" Justin asked.

Marcus's mind registered the letter lying on the table. He picked it up and handed it toward Justin.

The earl unfolded the paper and began reading. A moment later, he murmured, "Shay. Wait. *Shay*. This cannot be the fellow whose son you saved while on campaign in America?"

Marcus nodded.

Justin frowned. "What prompted you to contact him?"

"Landen Shipping informed me Steven Landen was serving in the Army."

Justin laughed. "Good of them to be so obliging."

"Colonel Shay located the boy."

"Boy?"

"He is twenty-five."

"I expected someone older than Elise."

"I thought the same," Marcus said.

"Something more you need to know," Justin said. "If Elise doesn't return from the dead, her shares go to the next living *blood* relative."

"Steven Landen would control Landen Shipping," Marcus said.

"Steven Landen *does* control Landen Shipping. Elise's stock isn't his—not until the allotted five years passes—but he controls her vote until then."

Marcus frowned. "Then why hasn't Ardsley simply killed him?"

"Because Steven's will bequeaths his shares and controlling interest to a distant cousin who lives in New York."

"My God," Marcus murmured. "Steven Landen is of no consequence—"

"If Price Ardsley has Elise," Justin finished for him.

"Why the bloody hell is her brother not here?" Marcus burst out. "Where did you get this information?"

Justin grinned. "There is always a disgruntled employee to be found." The earl returned his attention to the letter. A moment later, he looked up, shock written on his face. "My God, she shot her husband? Surely, it can't be true?"

"I believe every word," Marcus said.

Justin glanced at the letter. "You knew nothing of this? Of course not," he added.

Marcus gave a hollow laugh. "I knew I wanted her. Nothing else mattered."

The earl nodded. "Love blinds a man."

As does passion, Marcus added silently, then said, "I meant to leave immediately to find Steven, but if it is possible Elise is here—" he broke off, still unable to grasp the possibility.

"You must find the boy. He's the key to getting to Ardsley. I never met his sister. If our story is to hold any weight, it must come from you."

"But Elise…"

A glint appeared in Justin's eye. "I will find her."

Marcus grasped his cousin's shoulder and squeezed, then released him. "I'll depart tomorrow. We—"

The door opened and the waiter appeared, a plate of food in each hand. He approached the table and began to set Marcus's plate before him but halted, his gaze falling on the wine-stained tablecloth.

He straightened. "I shall replace the linen." He turned to leave, plates still in hand.

"Nay," Marcus said. "Leave the plates. We will live with the spilt wine."

The waiter looked as if he'd been asked to strip naked and run through the streets of Boston.

Marcus rested his gaze on him. "Leave the plates, lad."

The man did as instructed. "If you need anything—"

"We will call for you," Marcus cut in. "Until then, see that we aren't disturbed."

The waiter blinked, but gave a stiff bow and left.

Justin picked up his knife and fork. "I said you'd cut him to the quick."

"I'll be back well before Landen Shipping's next meeting," Marcus said. "Then I will cut Ardsley to the quick."

* * * *

Marcus slowed his horse in the dense forest and scanned the ground. The tracks in the soft South Carolina ground were less than an hour old. He glanced up through the trees. At most, the afternoon sun would be in the sky another two hours. At a sudden commotion in the trees ahead, Marcus jerked his hand to the musket in his saddle holster, but relaxed when a flock of bobwhite quail took flight. The leather fringes on the sleeves of the buckskin he wore swayed violently, then came to a rest as he focused again on the tracks and urged his horse forward.

Only a moment later he caught sight of two horses picking their

way through the trees about seventy-five feet ahead. He looked closer. One of the horses was riderless. He'd been following the tracks of *two* men, where—the distinct sound of a rifle being cocked answered the incomplete thought.

"Take the musket from its holster and toss it," a male voice said from above him. Marcus hesitated and a strong "Mister" settled the matter.

He slid the Brown Bess musket from its holster and tossed it to the ground. "I'm not here to cause trouble."

The sound of the rifle's hammer being uncocked from above was followed by the light drop of the man from the trees onto the ground behind Marcus.

"You tracked me some distance before I realized you were on my trail," the voice said. "Not bad for an Englishman."

Marcus slowly turned his horse and found himself facing a young man dressed like himself, except the other's clothes bore testament of the wearer's time in the saddle. This was Steven Landen. Those deep brown eyes—and the challenge they held—were all too familiar.

"Scottish Highlands," Marcus said.

"Well, Highlander, what are you doing in South Carolina tracking me?"

Marcus glanced at the Baker rifle the boy held loosely at his side—not so loose he couldn't yank it into position before Marcus was upon him. *Arrogant pup*. But perhaps it was an arrogance born out of experience. The British-made Baker rifle was known for its precision aim, a very good reason for a US Army tracker to carry the weapon.

Steven's gaze shifted past him and Marcus glanced over his shoulder to see the rider he'd spotted a moment ago standing a few feet away. He saw now what he hadn't discerned before. The buckskin-dressed man was Indian.

Marcus faced Steven. "How did you discover I was on your trail?"

"I'm the best tracker this side of the Mississippi," Steven said with unabashed candor. "White tracker, that is."

"You are Steven Landen, then?"

The boy gave no indication Marcus had hit the mark, only continued to study him.

"We need to talk. Privately," Marcus added.

"Anything you have to say can be said in front of Joseph."

"'Tis about your sister."

Steven's nonchalant demeanor vanished. "My sister is dead."

"Nay. She was lost off the coast of Solway Firth, Scotland."

Steven's jaw tightened. He looked at the Indian. "Joseph."

Marcus didn't hear the man leave but knew he had when Steven swung his gaze back to him.

"You have any idea how many people have *information* concerning my sister?" Steven's expression turned speculative. "None of them ever tracked me through the wilderness. You must feel damn confident about your information. You have five minutes. I should warn you, however, if I don't find your story amusing, I'll kill you."

A melancholy warmth rippled through Marcus. "That sounds like something your sister would say."

Steven's gaze turned icy. "If you want to delay dying, don't bother with the amusing anecdotes."

"I will begin with this." Marcus reached into the front pocket of his buckskin jacket.

Steven pointed his rifle at Marcus. "Easy."

Marcus paused, then slowly produced his and Elise's wedding certificate from the pocket. He dismounted, then strode to Steven and extended the certificate to him.

Steven rested his rifle against the tree he'd been hiding in. "Don't think we're alone," he said as he unfolded the document, "I saved Joseph's life once. He can't return to his Chickasaw tribe until he returns the favor, so he's hoping like hell someone will try to kill me."

Steven scanned the document. A moment later, he looked at Marcus and gave a short laugh. "You got the name wrong. Elise is not a Merriwether."

"Nay," Marcus said, "she's a MacGregor."

Half an hour later, Marcus laid Elise's death certificate on the ground between him and Steven. The boy stared at the document. The fire they had built flickered off his pale face in the waning daylight. He lifted his gaze to Marcus.

"No death certificate was issued for Elise." He stared at Marcus for a long moment before saying, "I have no way of knowing if a word of what you say is true."

"Perhaps you do." Marcus retrieved the gold band from his front pocket. He laid the ring on the death certificate.

Steven looked at the ring, his brow furrowing in thought, then he picked it up and held it up to the firelight. Marcus watched him read the words etched inside the band—*For all eternity*—words he'd read a thousand times over the last month.

Steven set the ring back on the document and looked at him. "Why tell me any of this?" He nodded toward the death certificate. "She's dead."

Marcus took a deep breath. "Mayhap not." He produced the next piece of evidence: the notice of reward for Elise's body that had

appeared in the *Sunday Times*.

By the time Marcus finished with the more bizarre half of his tale, Steven's expression had hardened. "I knew Price was a fortune hunter, but this goes beyond anything I suspected. Twenty-six percent of Landen Shipping remained held in trust for me until I reached twenty-one. When the shares became mine, Price wasn't pleased, but he still held controlling interest. Elise married Robert when she was twenty-one, four years before she would come into possession of her inheritance. Not that it mattered; Robert controlled the purse."

"The woman you describe is different than the one I knew. Elise —" Marcus laughed, "She has done things many men would grow fainthearted over."

Steven picked up the stick he'd laid beside him earlier and poked the fire. "She never wanted for courage. That night on the *Amelia*, she surprised even me." Steven looked at him with sudden surprise. "Damn! Her journal."

Marcus tensed. "What?"

Steven plunged the stick into the ground. "Amelia's doctor instructed Elise to keep a journal in order to chronicle her illness. After she died, Elise began doing research. Actually, she began the research before Amelia died but, by then, it was too late."

"Too late?"

"Amelia was diagnosed with everything from heart trouble to nervous disorders. No one could offer a cure. You won't believe this, I wouldn't have believed it either had I not caught Robert trying to kill her, but Elise suspected Robert of poisoning Amelia."

Marcus went cold. "Bloody hell."

"I learned of her suspicions from the journal. By then, Robert was gone." He gave Marcus a frank look. "Despite how I felt about Robert, if I hadn't walked in when he was strangling Elise that night, I would have attributed her suspicions to… well…"

Marcus clenched his fist. "If the bastard were alive, I would kill him myself."

Steven gave a cold laugh. "I would have done it long ago."

"Aye," he said. "I wager you would have."

Steven laid the stick back on the ground beside him. "Price being in Scotland and that bounty don't prove Elise didn't die in the carriage accident."

Marcus held his gaze. "Three months ago, Ardsley told the Landen Shipping board of directors that Elise was here in America."

Steven went white.

"Are you all right, lad?"

"When Elise married, I gave her my shares in Landen Shipping."

Marcus gave a slow nod. "The stakes are even higher. Ardsley

has begun negotiations for a large loan to Landen Shipping. He wants to expand the shipping routes."

Steven started. "What?"

"He began negotiations six months ago."

"How can he hope to make the vote without me?" Steven's lip curled up in a derisive twist. "Of course."

"Aye," Marcus said. "He would not need you if he has Elise."

Chapter Nineteen

Marcus strode into the Single Penny tavern with Steven behind him. Marcus glanced back at his young companion. They'd spent seven days on the road and the boy looked none the worse for wear. No one would suspect he wasn't a regular in the establishment. The deception went beyond the rough clothes he wore. The metamorphosis from upper-class gentleman to the rough, bawdy character ready to yank his knife from its sheath and open the gullet of any man who looked in his direction was complete. Steven certainly wasn't the typical wealthy American.

The boy's gaze rested for an instant on a table in the far corner of the room, then moved on. Marcus glanced in the same direction and realized he had seen Justin sitting with another man. Even in the shadows of the dimly lit room, Marcus understood what had snagged Steven's attention. Despite the rough clothes Justin wore, the way his manicured fingers curled around the beer mug he drank from gave away the fact he wasn't a typical river rat.

Steven looked at Marcus. Marcus gave a small jerk of his head and Steven followed as he strode to the table. Justin set the mug of ale on the table and looked up at their approach. Marcus slid into the seat to his right. Steven circled the table and took the seat to Justin's left.

"Marcus," Justin's cultured English accent remained evident despite the hoarse quality he injected into his voice.

"Justin," Marcus greeted in a thick, Scottish brogue.

"Meet William Sheldon of the Boston police department," Justin said.

"Shhh," Sheldon hissed, ducking his head down.

"Mr Sheldon," Justin said, "tell my friend what you told me."

Mr Sheldon looked about. He sat back suddenly and Marcus would have urged him on, but a tavern maid approached the table, two ales in hand.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she said, setting an ale before Marcus, then going around William to place the other in front of Steven. She straightened, saying, "You have a choice of jackrabbit stew or roast pig."

"Jackrabbit stew, my girl, all around," Steven spoke up.

Marcus hid his surprise at hearing the guttural accent Steven employed and nodded to the girl in assent when she looked at him. She started for the bar at the back of the room and Marcus focused on William.

"Lad," he said in low tones, "proceed with your tale, if ye please."

William cast a nervous glance about the room, then leaned forward. "Your friend here," he nodded toward Justin, "promised the remainder of the fee."

"Aye," Marcus said. "Whatever he agreed to, you'll get."

"If you don't mind, sir," William said, "I'll have my payment now."

Justin pulled forth a small pouch and set it on the table. William reached for it, but Marcus laid a hand on his when it covered the pouch. "The money stays where it is until I've heard what you have to say."

William nodded, and Marcus withdrew his hand. William released the pouch and placed his elbows on the table. "There's a place up north, a hundred and fifty miles or so, Bainbridge Hospital. A month ago, a man incarcerated his wife there because she believes she was Cleopatra in a past life."

"And what makes ye think this woman is the one we are looking for?" Marcus asked.

"The description your friend here gave. The woman is dark haired, late twenties and slim of build. The man is much older and seems to fit your description. He's rich, sure enough."

William sat back and Marcus saw the tavern maid approach again, tray in hand with four bowls of stew on it.

She set a bowl before each of them and looked at the men. "Anything else?"

"That'll be all," Steven said, and hunched over his bowl. He began clinking the spoon loudly against the side of the bowl.

The woman turned as he took a hearty mouthful. William gulped a spoonful of stew. He chewed, his gaze following her until she was out of hearing range. He took one more bite of food as two men passed, headed for a nearby table.

William pushed the bowl forward. "As I was saying, the man is rich. He's left strict orders that no one is to visit his wife and she is to be kept under heavy sedation."

Marcus's hand balled into a fist and, before realizing it, he started to push to his feet.

Justin grasped his shoulder and shoved him back into his seat. "Easy there, my fellow," he said, his voice all amusement. "You would think it was your own wife there instead of—well"—Justin flashed a grin—"you know how it is, Mr Sheldon, when a woman cuckolds a man."

William nodded. "Indeed, I do."

"Seems the lady was burning both ends of the candle," Justin said. "It's my guess her husband is teaching the wench a lesson far beyond that you could serve up, my boy." He gave Marcus a hearty

clap on the shoulder.

Marcus slumped back into his chair. "She didna' cuckold me," he muttered in a sullen a voice, and looked at William. "'Tis no' enough to be sure she's the one."

"She is the most likely one."

Marcus exchanged a glance with Justin. "What do you mean 'the most likely one?'"

"There's another woman, but she doesn't seem a good fit. A raving lunatic. Has nightmares about a child who was poisoned—"

Marcus started. Justin straightened and Steven dropped his spoon into his nearly empty bowl. William looked from one man to the other.

"Where is this woman?" Marcus demanded.

"Twenty miles outside of Boston in Danvers Sanitarium."

"Danvers?" Steven repeated in a loud voice.

Marcus shot him a warning look.

Steven lowered his voice. "That's an asylum for the criminally insane."

Marcus felt the blood rush to his head.

"What are her circumstances?" Justin cut in.

"Her father brought her," William replied. "She suffers from delusions that her child has returned from the dead." William shivered. "Most of the men working there fear her. There's nothing like the fear of the devil to put the fear of God into a man."

Or the fear of a courageous woman, Marcus silently added.

Minutes later, Marcus stepped from the tavern onto the dimly lit street between Justin and Steven. Once out of sight of the tavern, Marcus looked at Justin. "I am the spurned lover?"

Justin grinned. "You weren't anything until I thought you would do poor William in."

"Who is this William?"

Justin gave a deprecating laugh. "A Boston law-enforcement officer."

Marcus addressed Steven, "What do you know of Boston law enforcement?"

"I don't know William, but many Boston police officers are in a position to know information like what he told us."

Marcus nodded. "Where does Landen Shipping hold its board meetings?"

"The Brill Building, downtown Boston," Steven answered.

Justin said, "Ardsley will have to transport her from the sanitarium to the meeting,"

"Aye." Marcus replied. "Only, we will meet him long before he

reaches Boston."

* * * *

The sun peeked over the horizon. Not a single traveler had appeared on the road leading to Danvers Sanitarium while they lay hidden under the cover of darkness. Marcus tapped Justin on the shoulder and signaled that he would return momentarily. He slipped from the trees overlooking the road east of them, crept through tall grass, brambles, and bush up a hill. The wildly growing foliage ended abruptly. Across a vast manicured lawn, the view of the sprawling, ivy-covered, brick building—his first in the light of day—chilled him to the bone.

The pointed towers and peaked gables had lost the haunting look their silhouettes projected in the twilight hours and became, instead, the bared teeth of *The Witches' Castle*. A shudder ran through him. What sort of twisted mind had built a sanitarium on the spot where John Hathorne, the most fanatical judge of the Salem witch trials, once lived?

Marcus's heart hardened at sight of the iron-barred windows. He brought his gaze down to the stone steps of the front entrance. Marked on both sides by wrought iron railing, they lead up to a circular, covered porch. Columns supported the porch roof on either side. He looked again at the windows, studying one, then another, of what seemed an endless array of cells.

Which of those tiny rooms held Elise prisoner? So close. Marcus envisioned forcing his way past the attendants who fed off the brutality they inflicted upon the helpless inmates. The image, however, was violently replaced by the realization that those men would hold him until Price arrived. Then any power embodied in the information he held would become worthless—and Elise would be lost forever. He closed his eyes in an effort to banish the thought but saw, instead, her frail form, lying on a thin pallet, hands crossed over her breasts in readiness for the coffin. He shook off the vision, then turned from the menacing asylum. He crept down the slope and returned to Justin and Steven.

Marcus scanned the empty road before whispering, "What has gone wrong?"

"Mayhap Ardsley took her out before we arrived?" Justin asked.

Steven shook his head. "No. You heard what our scout said when we arrived yesterday evening. Price hasn't been to the sanitarium."

Marcus started to speak, but Steven cut him off. "The surrounding area is being watched. Had anyone ridden cross-country,

we would have been alerted."

"A single man could have slipped past your men," Marcus said. "Does Ardsley ride?"

"Quite well," Steven replied. "But he couldn't have approached the hospital without being spotted. As you have seen, Danvers is surrounded by open country."

"He would need a carriage for Elise," Justin said.

"Aye," Marcus agreed, "but if he didn't plan on bringing her to the meeting today, he would have come by horseback."

"If he doesn't need her at the meeting, he may not have come at all," Justin added.

"He has no hope of swinging the vote without her," Steven said. "He must bring her. Why keep her alive if he isn't going to present her?"

That was a question Marcus couldn't consider.

* * * *

Another day of living with the knowledge that Elise was locked in hell had worn Marcus beyond thin. The Single Penny's tavern door swung open and he snapped his attention onto the newcomer, his brother-in-law. His heart rate accelerated. The grim expression on the lad's face didn't bode well. Steven assessed the room in the same manner he had the day they'd met William Shelby, then pressed through the cluster of men milling near the door and shuffled across the room.

He slid into the seat opposite Marcus and without preamble whispered, "I'm a complete fool."

"What has happened?" Marcus demanded.

"We were so occupied with Danvers—so sure Elise was there—"

"Are you saying she is not?"

Steven shook his head. "No. Only that our knowing she is there created a distraction." He gave a harsh laugh. "If I didn't know any better, I would swear Price planned it." His mouth dipped into a deep scowl. "It occurred to me last night that I should question Price's servants."

"Wouldn't Ardsley stop you?" Marcus asked.

"If he knew, yes. There is little love lost between Price and his servants. The housekeeper, in particular, despises him." Steven halted and looked past Marcus. He realized the barmaid must be approaching with ale in hand. An instant later, she appeared at his right and set an ale before Steven.

"Any of that jackrabbit stew left?" Steven asked.

"Always got jackrabbit stew," she replied.

"Two," Steven said, and she left. He drank from his mug, then said, "Mrs Hartley is a jewel of a housekeeper and Price knows it. Every day, after lunch, she goes to the market. This afternoon, I met her there." Steven paused. "I've always wondered why she stays with Price. A woman with her skills could easily find another post. She doesn't live in terror of him as the other servants do.

"This is the only concession I have ever known him to make in his household. That, too, puzzled me. Price isn't a man to tolerate being questioned. Today, I discovered why she stays. Mrs Hartley has a son. He is now thirty years of age. About fifteen years ago, he killed a man in a brothel brawl. The dead man was a well-respected businessman. All these years, Price has been holding this over her head."

"Why tell you this after all this time?"

Steven gave a low grunt. "Two reasons, I suspect. One, she likes Elise. The second, once I told her Price was holding Elise captive she must have realized that there was a great chance I would deal with him legally. That would free her from Price's hold."

"Bloody hell," Marcus burst out. "You didn't inform her of my presence?"

Steven glanced around the tavern and Marcus cursed his temper.

The younger man leaned closer. "Of course not. But the woman's no fool. She knew I was up to something. Nothing goes on in any household the servants don't know, sometimes even before other family members, and with good reason; they're smarter than the devil himself. Our stew is coming." Steven slumped back in his chair.

Marcus did the same as the barmaid set a bowl of stew before him, then Steven. She turned and headed back to the bar. Steven placed his elbows on the table and took another drink of ale before stirring the stew.

"Mrs Hartley knew that Price told the board Elise was here in America," he said, and took a bite of stew. "He's in the habit of having late meetings in his home with board members. Last night, a woman was brought in. She was dressed in black. Heavily veiled and heavily sedated. Price carried her to one of the guestrooms on the second floor. He wouldn't allow anyone into the room when he took her up. Half an hour later, he called for Mrs Hartley. Imagine her shock at seeing Elise in the bed, looking as if she had all but stepped into the grave."

Marcus's heart missed a beat. "How did he get her past us—we left Danvers too soon."

"Don't lose yourself just yet, MacGregor. I thought the same, but there was something wrong with Mrs Hartley's story."

"What do you mean?"

"She said a single candle burned on a table in the corner of the room. The covers were tucked tightly around the woman's shoulders. Despite the dim lighting, Mrs Hartley observed the emaciated neck and hollow cheeks of the woman—and her hair—you know how thick Elise's hair is."

"Aye." Marcus remembered well the silky feel of the thick tresses between his fingers.

"Mrs Hartley said her hair was so thin that her scalp was visible in places."

"'Tis but two months since Arsdley abducted her. How is it possible—"

"It isn't," Steven cut in. "The resemblance must have been strong for Mrs Hartley to believe the woman was Elise, but Mrs Hartley said the woman was barely recognizable as the Elise she had seen just a year ago. Elise lost weight due to the stress of Amelia's illness, but she was, overall, very healthy."

Marcus nodded. "The housekeeper thought Elise had been wasting away an entire year."

"Right." Steven took another spoonful of stew. "Consider," he said between chewing, "it's not yet two months since Elise disappeared. Had Price starved her to the point of shedding that much weight, her heart would probably have given out."

"The woman is not Elise." Marcus leaned back in his chair. "Why an impersonator? Why not simply incapacitate Elise?"

"I can only guess," Steven said, "but—"

"But," Marcus interrupted, "he will not risk her leaving the asylum."

Steven nodded. "Price is… canny." His expression turned pained. "Had I been more aware—"

"Nay," Marcus cut him off. "The man is clever and he can't have done this alone."

Suddenly, Langley's words came back to Marcus. *"Ye have a spy, MacGregor."* Price Ardsley had help. The truth hit like a landslide. *The Campbells.* Marcus recalled the day they attacked the women at the loch and the look on the Campbell warrior's face when Elise called out that Nell had been taken. The man recognized the American accent. They had come for Elise—for the second time. Marcus suddenly understood why they hadn't accosted her when they kidnapped her: the ten thousand pound bounty. But how had they known—more importantly, who at Brahan Seer had aided them?

"MacGregor."

Marcus shook from his thoughts at hearing Steven's voice.

"What is it?" Steven asked.

"Ardsley may not be as omnipotent as he appears."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe some old enemies of mine were in league with him," Marcus said. "Elise had a bad habit of leaving Brahan Seer without an escort."

Steven paused in taking another drink of ale. "Brahan Seer?"

"Our home in the Highlands. She used to go alone outside the castle."

Steven grimaced. "I can believe she would be so foolish. Even as a girl, she drove Father to distraction, coming and going without permission."

"You are saying this is a fault of hers?"

The younger man barked a rough laugh. "MacGregor, if you're only now coming to this conclusion, I have no sympathy for you."

Marcus smiled faintly. "The woman can be a pain in the arse. She is mine, nonetheless."

"These enemies," Steven prodded.

"Aye. They kidnapped Elise once, tried a second time."

Steven regarded him for a long moment, then shook his head and took another bite of stew.

Marcus liked the lad. "The board meeting," he said. "The vote is to be held at Ardsley's home tonight?"

"No, tomorrow. But the board members are to meet at Price's home tonight. I wager Price is going to let them see Elise in her sick bed then, when he presents the paper tomorrow—a paper signed by my sister—it will be a *fait accompli*."

"What time this evening?"

"Eight o'clock."

Marcus glanced at the clock hanging on the wall behind the bar. Four fifty-five. "We have three hours."

Steven raised a brow. "If we show up and claim the impostor…"

"Aye," Marcus said. "If he wants my wife's fifty-one percent of Landen Shipping, he will have no choice but to return Elise to me."

"We should have stormed the damned hospital," Steven muttered darkly.

Marcus tensed, remembering all too well the strength of will it had taken to keep from hiring fifty men and raiding Danvers. Strength of will. Nay. Justin had been the voice of reason. They weren't in Scotland, Justin had reminded him. Here, Marcus was naught but a British subject on foreign soil. He had always thought of himself as a man of logic and not given to rash action. But, until now, he hadn't realized how much he relied upon his position as the Marquess of Ashlund—even more—the son of the Duke of Ashlund.

Ah, Ryan, my ancestor, how far our paths have diverged.

For the first time in his life, Marcus understood the true nature of Ryan MacGregor. All these years, Marcus thought he understood him—thought it was Ryan who demanded recompense for the wrongs done to the MacGregors over the centuries. But, in truth, how could Marcus, a man of wealth and position, understand a man who possessed nothing? A man who fought with the only weapon he had: his mind. Marcus laughed inwardly. How many years had he fought his enemies with the sword—the very thing Ryan had fought against?

Marcus turned his attention to his brother-in-law. "We are far from finished with Price Ardsley. We shall deal with him in a way that brings about his demise because of his own actions."

Steven's gaze intensified. "All I ask is that I be allowed to witness his end."

"Aye, lad," Marcus replied in a quiet voice. "You will be one among many."

* * * *

Marcus watched, concealed by the evening shadows among the trees, as the seventh carriage that night passed through the iron gates of Price Ardsley's mansion. The crunch of gravel beneath the carriage wheels grew fainter until the high and low seesaw pitch of cricket music again filled the quiet. Marcus's horse shifted beneath him and he gave the animal a soothing stroke. Steven's horse nickered softly, nuzzling his companion's nose, and Steven patted his shoulder.

Marcus looked at him. "What time is it?"

Steven pulled a pocket watch from the breast pocket of his suit. "Nearly eight," he whispered, and slipped the watch back into its place.

Marcus returned his attention to the mansion. "Is that the last of them?"

"Unless Brentley rode with one of the other board members, no."

"You are sure your vice-chairman will attend?"

Steven grunted. "Price would be glad not to have Brentley attend. Brentley is a thorn in his side. But Brentley has been chairman since the inception of the company and the other members would not attend a meeting of such importance without him."

Steven peered down the road and they lapsed into silence. The cricket symphony abruptly halted and, an instant later, the faint clop of hooves and turning of carriage wheels sounded on the public road up ahead. Marcus squinted until the outline of a coach took shape in the darkness.

"Brentley," Steven said.

The carriage passed through the gates and the darkness, once again, closed in around it. The nightlife sprang back to life. Still, Marcus waited several long moments, acutely aware of his companion's impatience before saying, "Now, Brother," and urged his horse from the cover of trees.

They slowed their horses through the gates and onto the gravel of the private lane. The cool air of fall brushed across Marcus's face, then snaked its way between his collar and neck in chilled fingers. The road wound through the grounds until, at last, a faint glow lit a beacon through the thick trees to the left. The road made a sudden left turn and the mansion came into view, two gas lights blazing on each side of the doors. No servant waited to greet them. All expected guests had arrived. Both men dismounted at the base of the stairs and hurried to the door. Steven entered with Marcus close behind. A butler appeared from a door at the end of the hallway carrying a tray laden with decanter and glasses.

"Sir!" he cried, rattling the tray.

"Simons," Steven replied, and started up the grand black walnut stairway to his right.

"Sir," Simons called again as Marcus followed Steven up the staircase.

"I'll see myself to the second floor," Steven called over his shoulder.

The tray was set down with a clatter and was followed by the light tread of feet on the stairs behind them.

"Simons is persistent," Steven said in a low voice, taking the stairs two at a time.

The staircase followed the wall straight up to the second floor. The landing turned sharply left at the top. Marcus strode down the corridor alongside Steven, who stopped at the fifth door on the left.

"Sir," Simons called from the landing.

Steven reached for the doorknob and Marcus saw his hand shake.

"Lad," he said, gently.

"Sir!" Simons cried, his voice nearly hysterical. "You know how Mr Ardsley does not like strangers upstairs." Simons had nearly reached them.

Steven looked at Marcus, gave a single nod, then said as he pushed open the door, "He's no stranger, Simons; he is my brother-in-law."

The words "brother-in-law" rang in the silence of the bedchambers.

Simons hit the doorframe with an audible slap. "Mr Ardsley, sir," he said between heavy breaths, "I tried stopping them."

Marcus locked gazes with the powerfully-built golden-haired man who stood nearest the bed. He looked to be about ten years older than himself. He outweighed Marcus by twenty pounds, but his fit frame testified that he wasn't a man given to excessive drinking or any such habits that would quicken the infirmities of age. Cold blue eyes stared back at Marcus. Here, at last, he understood what Elise so feared.

"I am—" Simons began, but Price Ardsley said in a quiet voice, "Go along, Simons. We're fine." Price shifted his gaze to Steven. "Steven, I wasn't expecting you."

"I am sure," Steven remarked.

Ardsley focused on Marcus, and said, "Sir?"

His tone was quizzical, but Marcus understood the flicker of expression that had said, *Lord Ashlund, you are a surprise*.

"Pardon me, Gentlemen," Marcus said, and brushed past the men who stood in stunned silence. He felt Price's eyes settle on him as he sat on the bed beside the woman Price claimed was Elise. Marcus took her cold, limp hand in his and lifted it to his lips. "Elise," he said in a choked whisper, then gently lay her hand upon her breast. Sliding his arms beneath her, he lifted her, bed covers and all, from the bed.

A chorus of protests sounded as Marcus turned toward the men gathered in the room.

Chapter Twenty

Elise felt herself lifted into a sitting position. Next came the familiar cold rim of the metal cup against her lips. *Do not drink,* she warned herself silently. *The thirst doesn't matter*. Her mouth felt like sandpaper, parched from lack of water, but the laudanum-laced water held a greater fear than death. She allowed her head to loll to one side. A meaty hand cupped her cheek and forced her into a more upright position. Liquid dribbled past her lips and into her mouth. She kept mouth and throat muscles lax and, despite the cold of the liquid as it trickled down her neck, none made its way down her throat.

"She can barely sit up," a coarse female voice said. "Why does she need more?"

"'Tis the doctor's orders," came the all-too-familiar Irish brogue of Ramsey.

"Bah!" the woman said. "If you want to waste your time forcing it down her throat, do so. I have better things to do."

The cup left Elise's mouth and the hand released her face. Again, she allowed her head to loll to one side.

"You're right," Ramsey said.

Her head was laid back on the pallet.

"They will dose her this evening. She's not likely to come out of this stupor before then."

The woman laughed. "She's not likely to come out of that stupor *ever*."

"How is the bleeding?" Ramsey asked.

Elise tensed inwardly, calling forth every ounce of strength not to react openly to what she knew was forthcoming. She felt her skirts lifted, then cool air washed her legs as the woman drew back the fabric. Elise bit back tears when her legs were spread, though only slightly this time.

Soon, she told herself, *soon. If I can convince them for just one more day that I don't need the laudanum, I will find a way out of this madhouse.*

There came a prod to the rags between her legs, and the woman said, "Not so bad."

"Let the night shift deal with it," Ramsey muttered. "The things they ask us to do."

The skirts were yanked back over her legs and she lay motionless, counting the ten steps her jailers took to the door, then the creak of the door as it opened and the echo of the clank being pulled shut. She waited a long moment.

Was he still there?

How many times had the Irishman stared in at her through the small, barred window on the door? Twenty—thirty times? She had lost count. There came the soft but distinct scrape she had come to know. She willed her body not to tremble. Ramsey had, again, waited for the woman to go, then opened the shutter on the window to stare at her from the other side.

Minutes passed—more, she thought, than he had taken before. It wouldn't matter if she screamed. In this place, everyone screamed. The opening swished closed. Elise began to tremble so badly she feared her teeth would chatter. Most rooms were built to keep the sound in, but her room seemed to amplify sound. She imagined her persecutors listening for the slightest sound so they might pounce upon her, pronounce her *stupor* a lie, and administer more laudanum.

Tears rolled from the corners of her eyes. She had lost her child—Marcus's child—less than two months in the womb. Even in her laudanum-induced state, she had known the moment the blood began to flow. How many days ago that had been, she couldn't say. There had been no pain, the laudanum had ensured that, but she had known. The degradation that followed paled in comparison to the despair.

Laudanum had been the instrument that had taken the child's life, but Price was the babe's murderer as certainly as if he had squeezed the life from the infant with his own hands. Robert had taken her child and her brother. Now Price had taken her second child. Between them, they had stripped her of all she held dear. *Not all*, her mind reminded her. There was still Marcus. More tears flowed.

Dear God, let him accept my death. Do not bring him to America.

* * * *

Marcus locked gazes with Price Ardsley. "My wife and I are leaving." He started toward the door.

The men, transfixed by the strange happenings, parted as he brushed past them. All but one—standing closest to the door—who stepped in front of him.

"Pardon me, sir," he said in a low, firm voice, "if you would explain."

"Brentley," Steven said, and stepped up beside Marcus. "Please clear the doorway."

"Steven," Price said. "Explain yourself."

Steven opened his mouth, but Marcus spoke. "I am Marcus MacGregor, the Marquess of Ashlund, and this"—he nodded to the woman in his arms—"is my wife, the Marchioness of Ashlund."

An instant of stunned silence passed, then the man standing closest said, "I assume you have proof of this claim?"

"My brother-in-law has the wedding certificate." Marcus motioned with a nod of his head in Steven's direction.

Steven retrieved the certificate from the front pocket of his great coat and handed it to Brentley. The older man took the paper while reaching into his pocket and pulling out a pair of spectacles. He wrapped the wires of the spectacles around his ears, then read the certificate.

"The ceremony was officiated by a Father Whyte of Badachro, Scotland," he said.

"I know nothing of that person or place," one of the other men said.

Brentley looked at Marcus. "Forgive me, sir, but you will understand this"—he indicated the wedding certificate with a small shake—"isn't enough."

"Steven," Marcus said, "take the ring from my breast pocket."

Steven pulled back Marcus's coat and reached inside the pocket. He retrieved the ring Robert had given Elise and handed it to Brentley. "The inscription," Steven said. "Read it.

Brentley took a step closer to the door, holding the ring out so that the light from the hallway glinted off it. He squinted, reading aloud, "For all eternity." He looked questioningly at Steven.

"That is the ring Robert gave Elise on their wedding day."

From the corner of his eye, Marcus saw Price's mouth thin.

Another of the board members cleared his throat. "What sort of proof is that?"

Brentley looked from his companion back to Steven. "You are sure?"

"Absolutely," Steven replied.

Brentley whipped his glasses off and faced Price. "What do you make of this, Price?"

Price stepped up to them and extended his hand. "May I see the ring?"

Brentley placed it on Price's open palm. Ardsley stepped into the doorway and examined the ring. An instant later, he turned his gaze onto Marcus. "It looks very much like the ring Robert gave Elise." He handed the ring to Steven.

"It could be a forgery," Brentley said.

"Possibly," Price agreed, then said to Marcus, "Have you other proof of your claims?"

"The night Elise was washed overboard, her husband tried to strangle her. She was forced—"

"That is common knowledge," Price interrupted.

Satisfaction surged through Marcus. So this was to be the line Price would not have him cross. "True," he agreed, "but there are

details which wouldn't have been common knowledge."

Price inclined his head. "Gentlemen," he looked around the room, "in the interest of privacy, perhaps it would be best if we reconvened in my study."

The men gave a general nod of agreement. Price grasped the servant's bell hanging near the door and tugged. A moment later, Simons appeared in the doorway.

"Simons, show my guests to the study."

"Indeed, sir," Simons replied. "If you would, gentlemen." He bowed.

"I cannot leave Elise," Marcus said.

The men hesitated, and Price said, "Gentlemen, if you will allow me, I will reassure Lord Ashlund that Elise will be well tended in his absence. Go with Simons. We'll be along directly."

The men filed out of the room until only Steven, Marcus, and Price remained.

Price closed the door, then faced Marcus. "What do you want?"

"My wife," Marcus said, and turned to carry the woman impersonating Elise back to the bed. He gently lay her on the mattress, straightened the covers about her neck, then faced Price.

"And the stocks?" Price asked.

"Yours, once you deliver her to me."

"They are mine now."

"All assets will be frozen for a minimum of three months," Steven interjected. "That is the time it will take to confirm the Marquess's claim. And"—he added with a slight smile—"that could easily turn into six months. The board will wish to be extremely thorough in this matter. In the end, they will be mine."

"It's a shame Robert's aim wasn't better," Price commented.

"Be that as it may," Steven replied evenly.

"You have until tomorrow evening to deliver Elise to the *Josephine*," Marcus said. "The ship is docked in Boston Harbor and awaits our arrival before departing for England."

"I have a signed affidavit giving me Elise's stocks," Price said.

"I care nothing for your money," Marcus said. "Return her to me, and I will not contest the documents."

Price looked at Steven.

"My sister's life is worth the shares I gave her."

Price returned his attention to Marcus. "You will dine with me tomorrow evening."

"An early supper. I have a friend aboard the *Josephine*. He *knows* Elise and will send me word once she arrives."

"And what about this puppy?" Price motioned to Steven.

Marcus looked at Steven.

"I, too, will be waiting at the *Josephine.*" His expression hardened. "I wish to see my sister before she returns to Scotland."

Price looked at Marcus. "You will sail on the *Josephine*?"

"Aye."

"And you"—he turned again to Steven—"will remain here to deal with me." Steven didn't reply, and Price said, "Let us adjourn to the library and explain how poor Elise was so out of her head she forgot her husband in Scotland. You can assure them you have no interest in her fortune."

"This woman leaves with us tonight," Marcus said.

For the second time that evening, Price showed a flicker of emotion. "A woman in her condition shouldn't to be moved."

Marcus shook his head. "I will not arrive tomorrow evening to find my sick wife dead."

"It's unlikely she will die. The only real thing wrong with her is malnutrition. That and the laudanum."

"Is malnutrition the only thing wrong with Elise?"

"Elise is quite well."

"Alive and well?" Marcus pressed, maintaining a firm grip on his fury.

"Very much alive."

"Then let us speak with your guests. Steven will remain here."

"Of course," Price said, and opened the door for Marcus.

At nine o'clock that night, Marcus settled the woman impersonating his wife into the carriage, then assisted the maid, who would tend to her on the short ride to the *Josephine,* into the carriage. He strode to his horse and took the reins from Steven. They mounted, then urged their horses after the carriage. They remained silent until long after leaving the estate.

"He has no intention of allowing you to return to the *Josephine* tomorrow evening," Steven said in a low voice.

"Aye," Marcus replied, and lapsed back into silence.

* * * *

Elise started awake, her eyesight finding and fixing on the sliver of light that jabbed beneath her door into the darkness of her cell. The stench of sweat, urine, and blood met her nostrils. Hers, she realized with a clarity she hadn't experienced in weeks. Memories washed over her in a tidal wave.

Scotland. The carriage careening down the road. Shots fired. *Price.* Price was in Scotland! No—he had been in Scotland—he—they—were now in America. He had brought her back to Boston. He

waylaid her coach. She squeezed her eyes shut. Six—seven men murdered in cold blood. And Mary—the memory of the girl's pleas for mercy as Price forced her into the carriage left Elise as cold now as they had then. Mary was the informer Marcus sought.

Marcus. Elise sobbed. He believed her dead. She ceased crying. She was dead. She had signed her death warrant when she signed over her shares in Landen Shipping. But the death of the unborn child he had used to coerce her now stirred something within her.

The child is dead! she mentally screamed. *Price has no more hold over you.*

He wanted her dead. Yet, his affirmation, when she demanded to know if he knew Robert had been poisoning Amelia, had shaken her in a way she hadn't thought possible. He had looked out through those expressionless eyes and answered "Of course" in that cool voice her mother had so loved.

The stirring flared into anger, and with anger came the realization her mind was free. No one had come the previous night to administer another dose of laudanum. She hesitated. Was this the next day? Perhaps two, three, or five days had passed. She couldn't know. But she could think, could find out. Was she strong enough to leave this place? Her heart skipped a beat. Was she strong enough to even rise from this putrid pallet?

Elise took a deep breath, then pushed up to a sitting position. Her pulse raced. The movement had been effortless. Could she—she shoved to her feet. She tripped, one foot having landed on the floor, the other on the pallet, and she stumbled sideways, slamming into the wall. She slid to the floor, head swimming.

"Too fast," she told herself between the gasps for breath she prayed was fear and not lasting effects of the laudanum.

Her pulse slowed and she, at last, rose. Her head remained clear, despite the lurch of her stomach with the first step. She halted, waited a moment, then, eyes fixed on the light, she edged forward until her fingers touched the cold steel of the door.

* * * *

Marcus closed the door to Miss Lisa Poteck's cabin aboard the *Josephine,* then followed the narrow corridor to the captain's quarters. With a perfunctory knock, he entered. Captain Garret sat at a large table, studying navigation maps that covered the large oak surface. He looked up as Marcus approached.

"How is Miss Poteck?" he asked in a refined English accent.

Marcus seated himself opposite him. "She will be fit enough for the meeting. All is in readiness?"

"It is, Lord Ashlund."

A loud knock sounded at the door and Steven entered.

Marcus came to his feet when he recognized the man behind Steven as one of those hired to watch Danvers Hospital.

"Ardsley has gone to Danvers," Steven said.

"When?"

The man answered, "I rode the moment he arrived. Less than two hours ago."

Adrenaline coursed through Marcus.

Steven was already consulting his pocket watch. "It is twenty-five past one." He stuffed the watch back into its pocket. "Price did just as you said he would."

"Aye, lad. He had no choice." Marcus turned to the messenger. "Wait for me on deck."

The man nodded, then left.

Marcus waited for the door to shut, then faced Steven. "The board members are ready?"

"They're waiting at a nearby tavern." He shook his head in obvious disbelief. "I thought you were wrong. Had I gone to Danvers as I wanted…"

His brother-in-law had no notion of the will it had taken Marcus to remain idle on the *Josephine*. He, too, wanted nothing more than to catch Price Ardsley on the road to Danvers, but he couldn't chance Elise being hurt in the gunfight. Justin would follow her. If worse came to worst, he would attack and take Elise from Price.

"Ardsley had to be sure you and I were aboard the *Josephine,*" Marcus said. "You can be sure he knows of our continued presence here." Marcus faced the captain. "Captain Garret, please have your doctor prepare Miss Poteck."

"As you say," Garret replied crisply.

Marcus started for the door, Steven on his heels. Once in the corridor, Steven closed the door and called out to Marcus. He halted.

"Did you inform your cousin of your plan not to sail back to Scotland with Elise?"

"Instructions await him on the ship they are to sail on," Marcus replied.

"He will not be pleased. As for Elise—"

"Elise will be well looked after. Justin knows what he's about."

"And if you don't make your ship?"

"I will."

* * * *

Elise's hand shook as she pressed a palm against the iron door.

She pushed gently. The door swung open. A cry of surprise rose in her throat before she could stifle the sound. Why was her door unlocked? They believed she was still in a stupor!

She stepped as far as the doorway and peeked into the hall. The long corridor was empty. She stepped from the room and stopped two paces into the hallway. A single light lit the hallway near where she stood. Doors lined both sides of the corridor. She looked left, then right. Both directions turned into what seemed yet another hallway. Which way was out? Out—out to where? Where was she going? Marcus. No. She would not endanger him.

Blood roared through her veins; her head pounded. Panic rose. Which way? Choose a way, any way! She started forward. Her courage grew with each infinitesimal step forward. Near the end of the hallway, the tip of a banister extended out to where the hallway turned left. *Stairs.*

A scream shattered the silence. Elise bit back a shout and hugged the wall. Another cry, fainter this time but close, rent the air again. She peered in the direction she had been moving. A door stood three feet from her. She edged toward the room. The door stood slightly ajar and she peered inside.

"No!" a woman wailed in a low voice. "Please, Ramsey, not tonight, not tonight." Her voice trailed off repeating the plea.

Elise jammed her eyes shut. *Ramsey*, the monster who had been watching her.

"No," the woman cried again.

Elise entered the room. "Shhh," she said.

The huddled form in the far corner jerked upright. "Who's there?" the woman said. "Sara? You're not Sara."

"No," Elise soothed. She stopped near the woman and knelt.

The woman shrank back. "Ramsey sent you. He wants to know if my monthly flux has passed. Tell him no! It will never pass. Tell him —"

"No," Elise whispered. "Ramsey did not send me."

"Liar," the woman hissed. She jabbed a finger at Elise and Elise scrambled to her feet. The woman began weeping. "Never," she repeated. "My flux will never pass. I won't spread my legs for him again." She fell into a fit of loud wails.

Elise backed up. The poor soul was mad. Tears streamed down Elise's face. Ramsey. She couldn't remember his face—Price had drugged her before bringing her to the sanitarium—but she could imagine all too easily what he was like. How many other women had he abused? She turned and fled the room.

Ignoring the feel of the stiff, filthy fabric, she ran toward the stairs. Her stomach roiled. Still she ran. A noise sounded behind her.

She jerked her head around to glance over her shoulder but saw nothing. Another inmate of the many rooms? She faced forward again, slamming into what, at first, felt like a stone wall. She recognized the fingers of steel that gripped her shoulders even before she looked up into the face of Ramsey.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Release me!" Elise shouted.

She thrashed wildly and Ramsey's grip on her shoulders turned painful.

"Well, now," he said, his Irish brogue sharpened with raucous laughter, "what have we here?"

"Let me go!" She struggled harder, despite the pain of his beefy fingers digging still deeper into her skin. "My husband—" she began, but he cut her off with more foul laughter.

"Your husband committed you, my bonnie girl. So don't bother threatening revenge."

"Price Ardsley is *not* my husband."

"Don't know the man's name. Don't care. He put you here and plainly doesn't plan on you ever seeing the light of day." Ramsey yanked her to him and, with one hand, stroked her hair. "That leaves you and I to sport, eh?"

Elise raised a foot and stomped on the top of his boot. He yelped and leapt back. She whirled and lunged forward.

"Bloody fool wench!"

He seized her from behind and flung her against the wall. Ramsey crashed into her back, knocking the breath from her. He snaked a hand around her waist. Elise wedged her hands between herself and the wall and clawed at his fingers.

"Damn—" he hissed, pulling his hand free.

He grabbed her arms and yanked them back. Her arms felt as though they would tear from their sockets as he crushed her to the wall.

"You're a plucky one," he wheezed in her ear. "Most wenches here are too daft to even know their names. Takes all the fun out of the play."

He pinned her arms between their bodies with one hand, then rammed the fingers of his free hand into her hair. Elise jerked her head aside, but he mashed her cheek against the wall.

"You haven't had a bath since coming here, but Sara kept you cleaned up where it counts." He thrust his hips against her.

Elise's stomach churned, more at the knowledge of the shared intimacy when Sara had tended to her than the feel of his erection digging into the cleft of her buttocks.

"Not a pretty sight," he went on. "Until she cleaned you up, that is. Then," he roughly ground himself against her, "I knew you and I would be spending time together. I was waiting for the right time." He laughed again. "You decided you wanted me now, eh?"

She shoved hard against the wall in an attempt to thrust his body away from hers, but he slammed back all the more brutally, groaning when their bodies jammed together. His fingers tightened in her hair and she cried out in pain.

"Aye, my girl," he rasped. "Scream. In this place, no one will care, and I like it."

He released her hair and forced his hand into the small of her back where his belt had been digging into her flesh. His belt jingled and, for the first time, Elise felt loathing and fear vie in earnest with outrage. Her body trembled and her knees weakened. She twisted, but he yanked back on her arms, and she felt her arms begin to separate from their sockets.

His belt and trousers hit the floor with the buckle landing with a dull clank. He grabbed her skirts and yanked them up. Elise kicked backwards with the heel of her foot, hitting the hard bone of his shin. He grunted, but only spread his legs and thrust his hips into her.

"I will not be another of your victims!" she shouted.

She grit her teeth and jerked her head backwards. The back of her head struck Ramsey's hard skull. He shrieked, yanking hard on her arms as he fell back a pace. Pain reverberated through her head. Elise bit her lip to halt the pain as he unexpectedly leapt back from her. Iron fingers seized her arm and she barely registered the difference in this and Ramsey's hold as she was spun her around.

Elise gasped.

Price Ardsley stared down at her.

* * * *

Two hours after the messenger arrived informing Marcus that Price had arrived at Danvers, a messenger arrived at the *Josephine* directing Marcus to come immediately to Price Ardsley's home. Half an hour later, Marcus was shown into his private study. A fire crackled in the hearth and Price sat behind the mahogany desk he had occupied when they had explained Elise's situation to Landen Shipping's board of directors. A tumbler of whiskey sat before Price. How would this man explain Elise's situation when the board members appeared here later this morning?

"Please," Price motioned to the chair in front of the desk, "have a seat."

Marcus sat.

"Would you like a drink?" Price asked, straightening.

"Nay."

Price leaned back. "Word will arrive any moment that Elise has been safely deposited aboard the *Josephine*."

"You had until this evening. Why bring her so early?"

"I thought her speedy return would please you."

"Her not being abducted would have pleased me."

"Rest assured she is safe. So long as she—you both—remain in Scotland. You've said nothing about the boy." Price sipped his drink.

"He is no threat to you."

"He won't take lightly that I kept his sister prisoner."

"I have convinced him to accompany us to Scotland," Marcus gave the planned answer.

Price seemed to contemplate this. "The longer the stay, the better."

"Aye," Marcus agreed.

The sound of boots on carpeted floor were heard, and Price said, "That would be our young friend now."

As if on cue, the door opened and Steven entered. "Elise is safely on the *Josephine*."

"She is well?" Marcus asked with as much calm as he could exert.

Steven turned his glare to Price. "She has a dislocated shoulder and looks as if she hasn't bathed since her abduction."

Marcus jerked his gaze back to Price and barely managed to check the compulsion to lunge across the desk.

"Your brother-in-law will now take a message to the captain that he is to set sail before the hour is up," Price said.

"I will not leave," Steven shot back.

"Aye, you will." Marcus prayed the boy wouldn't pull the pistol he'd noticed stuffed into his waistband. "You have pen and paper?"

Price produced paper from a desk drawer and laid it before Marcus as he scooted the quill, sitting at his left, up alongside the paper. Marcus wrote the note instructing the *Josephine* to set sail immediately, then folded the missive and extended it toward Steven.

"Anyone can deliver this," Steven protested.

Marcus shook his head. "You take it, lad, and be on the ship when she sails." This Marcus had *not* discussed with Steven, for the boy would not have agreed. Chances were, he wouldn't obey now.

Steven looked from Marcus to Price, then snatched the note from Marcus's grasp. He settled his gaze on Price. "We aren't finished."

Price nodded with a sigh and Steven faced Marcus. "You shouldn't have come here."

"Take care of Elise," Marcus said.

"That I will," he said, and left.

Marcus focused on Price. "My father, the Duke of Ashlund, will be waiting for the *Josephine* when she arrives. If anything happens to Elise or Steven, if any attempts are made to harm either of them,

someone will set sail from Scotland before I step onto Scottish soil."

"I have no intention of harming Elise."

Aye, neither will you harm her brother, Marcus silently added. "How long am I to wait here?" Marcus asked.

"Until word arrives that the *Josephine* is well out of Boston Harbor. I estimate two hours."

"A guard stands outside this door?"

Price gave a single nod.

"I would have preferred to wait at one of the harbor taverns," Marcus said, not feeling the slightest twinge of guilt at the lie. He had planned all along to be here when the men of Landen Shipping arrived on Ardsley's door about the same time the *Josephine* left Boston Harbor.

"Shall I have refreshments served?" Price asked.

"Nay," Marcus replied. "I dine only with friends."

Nearly two hours of silence later, there came a quick knock on the library door. Price looked toward the door as it opened and Simons entered.

"Sir," the butler said out of breath, "Mister Brentley and the other gentlemen from Landen Shipping are downstairs. They are demanding to see you—" A pounding of footsteps in the hallway intruded into Simon's speech. "There they are, sir. I feared they would not wait."

Brentley appeared in the doorway. The rest of Landen Shipping's board of directors piled up behind him. Brentley stepped inside the room and looked at Marcus, who rose.

"We have just come from the *Josephine*," Brentley said.

"The *Josephine*?" Price asked evenly.

"Yes," Brentley replied, and the room broke out into a babble of voices. "Gentlemen," he shouted. "Gentlemen, please!"

Another figure appeared behind the men. The din quieted as Steven pushed past them and halted beside Marcus.

"You should have sailed on the *Josephine*," Marcus said.

"As should you have," Steven replied.

"Price," Brentley said, "we have just spoken with Miss Poteck and Elise."

"Miss Poteck?" Price said as if he had never heard the name in his life.

"Don't," Brentley cut in, his quiet voice harsh. He produced two folded pieces of paper from his front coat pocket. He unfolded them and held up one. "This is a signed affidavit from Miss Poteck, explaining in detail how you paid her to impersonate Elise Kingston." Price frowned, but Brentley went on. "This," he lifted the other document, "is Elise's statement." He continued in a half strangled

voice, "She swears you kidnapped her in Scotland and brought her to Boston against her will, then incarcerated her in Danvers Hospital." Marcus's heart raced as if hearing this for the first time. Brentley lowered the papers. "If I had been given this information without the benefit of witnesses, I would put a bullet between your eyes."

A murmur circulated through the men. Surprise flickered across Price's impassive face. Marcus had the sudden urge to slip the knife from his boot and throw it at him. However, the mental image of Price's fine white shirt darkening with his blood dissipated when Brentley said, "As it is, I will have to satisfy myself with the punishment allowed by the law. As you may know, Judge Quinley and I are well acquainted. I will see to it he takes a personal interest in this case. I have always known you were a scoundrel, but this"—Brentley faltered—"this goes beyond anything I could have imagined."

He shook his head, his blue eyes clouded with disbelief. "The things Elise claims in this document…" He paused and held Price's gaze. "It's a wonder the girl survived." He looked at Marcus. "You have my deepest sympathies, Lord Ashlund."

Marcus's gut twisted. What more was wrong with Elise than Steven had admitted? What had Brentley seen that the younger man hadn't? Marcus gave a single nod and, once again, everyone began talking. He glanced at Ardsley. Price met his gaze with the same unruffled expression he always wore. A chill passed through Marcus. He turned and left the room.

A moment later, Marcus and Steven stepped from the mansion out onto the front steps. Marcus looked from the boy who stood at the bottom of the stairs holding his and Steven's horses across the trees surrounding the mansion to the sky that hinted at dawn. He and Steven strode down the steps, mounted their horses and urged them into a walk. They rode in silence until passing from the gates.

"Elise is safely sailed on the *Surrey*?" Marcus asked.

"Justin smuggled her off the *Josephine*. An easy feat with the *Surrey* docked only two slips down. I watched the ship sail. No one suspected a thing, including Brentley and the others."

Marcus allowed the first breath of relief since Elise had gone missing. Autumn was just beginning. The journey would be an easy one. "Steven," he said in a quiet voice, "is she truly well?"

"As I said, her shoulder is dislocated and she hasn't bathed since leaving Scotland."

"Otherwise?"

Steven hesitated, then said, "In a way, she's the Elise I knew; in a way, she isn't." He paused. "She has passed through fire since I last saw her, but losing Amelia changed her, and there is her marriage to you."

"We were wed but a night when Price took her."

Steven blew out a breath. "You didn't mention that."

Marcus looked at him. "She is my wife. It doesn't matter whether for a day or a year."

"I suppose not." Another moment of silence passed and Steven said, "She had no idea you were coming for her."

Marcus jerked his gaze onto Steven.

"I believe she had hoped you wouldn't come."

"Bloody hell," Marcus burst out. "Why?"

"It's easy to see she lied to you."

"She didn't tell me about Ardsley."

"Neither did she tell you she shot Robert."

"Nay," Marcus replied.

"She saved my life. You think she knew about the bounty on her head?"

"How could—" Marcus stopped, remembering the night at Michael's when she laid the onion before Michael *after* removing his copy of the *Sunday Times*—the copy Erin had brought.

Everyone in Brahan Seer knew how Michael loved reading the newspaper. Anyone passing through Edinburgh brought a copy at least as far as the *Glaistig Uain*. From there, the copy, eventually, made its way to Michael. Elise lived at Brahan Seer for four months before Marcus returned. All that time she had been going to the cottage and searching the paper for news. By God, on his return from London the last time, he had brought a copy of the paper. It still sat on his desk.

"Why not simply ask to have the paper brought to Brahan Seer?" Marcus whispered.

"What?" Steven asked.

"I thought I had never met a woman more stubborn."

"And something has altered your assessment?"

Marcus smiled, but the smile faded as quickly as it appeared. He looked past the trees that lined the road up to the sky. The ship he was to sail on awaited him. Three more weeks would pass before he got his answers. His gut tightened another notch. He had enough answers to last a lifetime. Elise hadn't wanted him to come for her. Did he need more?

"She asked about you," Steven said.

"What?" Marcus looked at him, startled.

"We had no time for discussion." Steven gave a mirthless laugh. "Seems that's how it has been with us for some time. Had I taken more time—never mind. We had a devil of a time convincing her to get on the ship this morning. She didn't want to leave without you."

Relief mingled with frustration. "By God," Marcus muttered.

Steven laughed in earnest this time. "Surely, you expected no

less."

"I expect her to have some common sense."

"What is common sense, Ashlund? Well, never mind. She's made a mess of things and knows it—"

A shot rang out.

A bullet whizzed past Marcus's ear. His horse lunged forward. Marcus yanked on the reins, following Steven, who already galloped for the cover of trees. Another shot resounded and Marcus saw wood splinter in the tree he sped past. He pulled his horse up alongside the place Steven had leapt from his horse.

"*Price*," Steven hissed.

He yanked the pistol from his waistband and crept toward the edge of the trees. Marcus jumped from his horse and started after him. Steven halted just before the trees gave way to the road, then darted from the cover of the forest.

"Steven!" Marcus shouted, and raced after him.

Marcus's heart hammered against his chest. He dove into the trees across the road and came to a skidding halt at seeing Steven, pistol raised and aimed at Kiernan.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Steven yelled, and squeezed back on the trigger.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Marcus paused on the deck of the *Dauntless*, one foot on the gangplank, and scanned the Edinburgh dock. It was not quite noon, yet storm clouds filled the sky, casting dark shadows reminiscent of nightfall. The docks teemed with activity. Bales of dry goods and crates of supplies lay stacked on the boardwalk. Sailors and dock workers hurried to load them onto ships before the rains fell. Marcus spotted Erin near a crowd of sailors.

Erin caught his gaze, and Marcus nodded, then started forward. He avoided a man carrying a bag of provisions on his shoulder and stepped onto the dock. For the thousandth time, Marcus swore an oath to go to the grave before setting foot on another ship bound for America. He had been forced to make too many hard choices these last three months—more than enough to last a lifetime. Elise might never forgive some of the choices.

He stopped before Erin, who was looking past him. "What is it?" Marcus demanded.

"I don't see Kiernan."

Marcus's throat tightened. "Kiernan—"

"Father!"

He turned at hearing his son call.

The boy was hurrying down the gangplank. He dodged his way through the people and passing hackneys before reaching Marcus.

"Kiernan," Erin said with obvious relief. "Your grandfather sends word you are to come immediately—"

"Kiernan will be going straight to London," Marcus said. "I will deal with my father." Marcus looked pointedly at Kiernan.

"Yes, Father. Directly to London."

"Do not return to Brahan Seer until I send for you."

"That's rather unreason—"

"You have no say in the matter," Marcus cut him off.

Kiernan sighed. "As you say, Father."

"If I hear you have left London before I give permission to do so, I'll come for you myself."

"So you have said," Kiernan replied.

"Then you comprehend the situation."

"I do."

Marcus gave him a curt nod. "I assume you can make your way from here?"

"Of course."

The sailors who stood nearby suddenly let up a cheer and several among their ranks jostled Marcus and Kiernan. Marcus

motioned Kiernan and Erin to follow. He strode several paces from them, then stopped and faced the two young men.

"It's early yet," he said to Kiernan, "you can cover at least a third of the journey if you start immediately." Marcus looked at Erin. "You brought three horses?"

"Aye. They are at the Bliney tavern."

"Good. Kiernan, you may have lunch before leaving. Erin and I will begin straightaway for Brahan Seer." Marcus started in the direction of the tavern but stopped when Erin said, "Laird." He turned. Neither of the young men had moved. "What is it?"

"Lady Ashlund is not at Brahan Seer."

"Not at—where the bloody hell is she?"

"Ashlund."

Marcus frowned. "Is something amiss at Brahan Seer?"

"Nay," Erin quickly assured him. "She simply refused to go there."

"Has my father seen her?"

"He is at Ashlund."

Erin reached into his pocket and produced a note. Marcus recognized the paper his father used on the rare occasions he wrote missives. He took the letter, tore open the seal, and read.

Marcus,

Elise is safely in Ashlund. When she refused to come to Brahan Seer, I left for Ashlund. She gave me your letter. I read it, then read it to her, but only after she confessed to me what she says is her entire story. It seems she knew nothing of your travels in America. I believe the danger you faced genuinely upset her. That is only right.

I thought it better not to force her to return to Brahan Seer, so we await you in Ashlund. Bring my grandson with you.

Cameron

Ashlund lay a three-hour hard ride away. He would see Elise before the evening meal.

Three hours later, Marcus and Erin rode into the stables at Ashlund. The stables were empty when they arrived, so Marcus left Erin to attend his horse and hurried to the mansion. His butler met him.

"Welcome home, Lord Ashlund," Nelson cried.

"Nelson." Marcus smiled. "Where will I find my father?"

"He is in the library, I believe."

"And my wife?"

Nelson looked thoughtful. "She planned to go to the solarium."

Marcus didn't move.

"Was there something else, Lord Ashlund?" Nelson asked.

"Nay," Marcus replied, and strode down the hall toward the solarium.

Marcus jerked open the solarium door with unexpected violence. He paused, startled at the intensity of feeling, then, regaining his composure, stepped inside and closed the door softly behind him. He had a clear view of the aisle ahead of him and Elise wasn't in sight. He started forward, scanning the foliage and flowers that separated the aisle he walked down from the other aisle. Suddenly, he caught sight of her through the *calanthe rosea*. She stood gazing out the window, her back to him. The small lavender orchids snaked up their fragile vines, framing her body between their branches.

He halted. The lush hair that hung loosely about her shoulders didn't hide the thinness of those shoulders and arms. He detected a difference in her stance. Gone was the lofty air. In its place was a stronger sense of being in the here and now. Steven was right; she was the same yet wasn't.

Marcus continued forward. When he reached the end of the aisle, Elise turned as if she heard his approach. The faint smile on her face snapped into a gasp as their gazes met. She gave a cry and collapsed onto the stone bench beside her. Her hand flew to cover her heart and her wide eyes remained fixed on him. He halted a few feet from her. He discerned dark smudges beneath her eyes—eyes that weren't the clear brown he remembered. They wore a haunted look, one that perhaps mirrored his own. No joy shone in her expression. That, too, he knew, mirrored his own. Still, she was beautiful. Damn her—damn her beauty.

During the month-long trip to America he had remembered every lovely line of her face, the soft timbre of her voice and sweet gestures that had enchanted him so. Upon arriving in Boston, his thoughts had been consumed with finding her and bringing her safely home. Those months had distanced him from the goddess she had become in his mind and she had become the woman who stood before him now—more flesh and blood than angel.

As if reading his mind, she said, "I told you that you couldn't know."

"I could have, had you told me."

Elise dropped her gaze. "So easy to say now. I couldn't be sure—there was no time—"

"How much time would have been enough, Elise?"

She looked at him and he saw the tears pooling in her eyes.

The sadness in her expression deepened. "You're right." She turned so that her profile was barely visible to him and he realized she fought tears. "I cannot believe you're here," she said in a whisper. "Cannot believe I am here. You should have left me there. Were you hurt?"

"Look at me and see for yourself." Her head jerked up and he locked her gaze. "Do I look well?"

"I—"

"Do I resemble a man who has lived the past three months in wedded bliss?"

"I know I endangered you," she replied.

"And Kiernan."

She blanched. "Yes, Kiernan—and the others. I didn't intend on returning. I wouldn't have done that to you."

"Wouldn't have done *that* to me?" he thundered. "Instead, you would have left me in misery the remainder of my days?"

"If I am here, you are in misery; if I am gone, you are in misery."

"Misery of your making."

Elise shot to her feet. "I am aware of my mistakes. I've had plenty of time to recount them."

"Aye," he replied. "And did you recount the biggest mistake of all?"

Her eyes blazed with a bravado he believed bordered on hysteria. "Which biggest mistake would that be, Marcus MacGregor?"

"Leaving me before I had the chance to really love you—and be loved by you."

She faltered as if she would crumple back onto the stone bench.

His hands worked into fists at his sides. "We are finished with lies. God knows, I'm as guilty as you. I knew you feared something. I have been a fool." He stared at her astonished face. "I won't make you a prisoner, but I must know you will use good sense in the future. Do you understand that, as my wife, you cannot go about like a peasant's wife?"

"I used good sense when I left Whycham House," she retorted.

"Aye?" He clenched his fists tighter. "You can say that when you knew Ardsley had a bounty on your head? You didn't tell me, the one man who could have—would have—protected you. You married me but didn't trust me. I told you I would not fail you."

Elise burst into tears and covered her face with her hands.

"Surely, you expected no less?" he pressed.

This, Marcus suddenly realized, was to be his revenge. She

would have to live the rest of her life with him loving her, no matter her faults. Mayhap she would love him in return, despite his faults. Love him, aye. Forgive what had happened in Boston… what had happened to Steven? Perhaps not.

She reseated herself. Marcus sat beside her. He placed a hand on her shoulder. She stiffened, but he recognized the reaction as fear not loathing.

"I must know what happened," he said. *Then we shall see what you think of my sins*.

He waited. Her sobs at last subsided into a deep sigh. She faced him but avoided his gaze. "I left Whycahm Hall. Mary told me—" Her gaze abruptly jerked to meet his. "Oh, Marcus," she cried in a voice so full of sadness it startled him, "Mary—" She choked.

"Aye," he said quickly. "I know."

"No! Mary was the spy. She was giving the Campbells information."

"What?" Blood pounded through his veins, the rushing sound in his head making it hard to think.

"Yes," Elise went on hurriedly. "She argued with Price. I heard enough to understand she had been passing information to the Campbells. That's why they were on MacGregor land. I didn't believe you when you said their presence had something to do with me. I am at fault, and I don't deserve to be here, but I swear, I wouldn't have left Whycham house if not for her urging."

"What happened?" Marcus demanded.

"After Sophie showed us to the guest chambers in Whycham House, Mary told me about Ashlund and how the stables were too close to the main house. I remembered Winnie telling me of her uncle who died of terrible burns, and Mary was so vivid in her descriptions of Ashlund—"

"Mary had never been to Ashlund," Marcus cut in savagely.

The anguish in Elise's eyes nearly did him in. "How could I know?"

Aye, how could she know? "I was wrong not to understand how little of us you understood," he murmured.

"You can't blame yourself, that is—"

Marcus leapt to his feet. "You are ignorant of a great many things here, Elise. Don't make the same mistake you made before."

She blinked and he knew he'd hurt her, but he wouldn't allow her ignorance to go unchecked this time. "Mary has received her just rewards. Forget her. What happened next?"

"About forty-five minutes after we left Whycham House, we were accosted by highwaymen—or I thought they were highwaymen." Elise shuddered with such obvious fear Marcus clenched his hands at

his sides to keep from slamming a fist through the solarium's glass wall. "I thought they were simple highwaymen so threw my wedding band out the window of the carriage." She looked at Marcus. "I am sorry. Sophie told me the emerald was in your family for centuries, but I meant to give you a clue."

So, Sara McPhee hadn't taken the ring. "You did right," he said.

Gratitude flickered across her features, then she went on. "When we reached the point where they were gaining on us, more men appeared from within the trees and intercepted us." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Your men fought valiantly. Price shot Richard and Taylor."

Two of the men he had planned on hunting down and killing. "They were good men."

"Price pulled me from the carriage. He left Mary inside. The men…" Elise faltered. "Three—no—four of them, they were beaten half senseless, then the carriage was run off the cliff."

Marcus's mind raced. The woman who he thought was Elise must have been put in the carriage after it crashed into the water. What poor soul had Ardsley snatched from her life to take Elise's place?

"The other man," Elise rushed on, "I don't remember his name." She turned an anguished look on him. "I should remember his name."

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know. Price forced laudanum down my throat. I awoke aboard a ship. He made threats. I didn't fear his threats against me, but…"

"He threatened me?" Marcus asked quietly.

"Yes. But…" she halted and he saw the agony on her face.

"Kiernan?" he pressed.

"Not him…" Her gaze dropped again and she said in a whisper, "Your other child."

"My other—" Marcus fell back a pace, feeling as though he had collided headlong with a horse racing toward him at breakneck speed. "What are you saying?"

Elise was shaking. "I-I couldn't be sure so early on. I had missed my monthly flux by only a week. When Price told me he knew, I was so startled that he instantly knew."

Marcus grasped Elise by the shoulders. "You are with child?"

She slumped in his grasp and began crying so hard that Marcus was shaken to the core.

"Elise," he insisted with more gentleness.

"The laudanum." She forced back the tears. "They fed me laudanum every day—every hour, it seemed." She appeared to deflate even more. "I lost the child."

Hot rage flashed in a thick lightning bolt of red across his vision. He had sat across from Ardsley, stared into his eyes, and all along the bastard had known he was responsible for the loss of the child—*my child*. Yet the man had returned his stare and smiled.

"If I faced Ardsley now—" Marcus cut off the statement at seeing the sudden terror on Elise's face, but her expression said she understood all too well the unfinished words. *Nothing could stop me from killing him*—nothing *will stop me from killing him*. The oath never to set foot on American soil again rang in his head—a vow he would break.

"This is why I didn't tell you the truth before our marriage." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I am sorry. I realized too late you would st-stop at nothing to—"

Marcus crushed her to him. Her body melted against his and he prayed the action was the first in the weakening of the wall between them.

* * * *

Marcus shifted his gaze from the flames in the hearth of his London study to the Earl of Loudoun. The shocked expression on the earl's face when Marcus had laid the edict signed by King George on the desk was far better revenge than any Marcus could have devised.

"You drag me here for this rubbish?" Loudoun demanded.

"By King George's command," Marcus replied evenly.

"Ridiculous," he muttered.

"Would you have preferred I continue to take matters into my own hands?"

The look on Loudoun's face said he would have preferred just that.

"You do not seem to comprehend," Marcus said. "I tire of the fight. It will end one way or another. I can raze every keep between Brahan Seer and Castle Kalchurn. You cannot doubt I have the power."

"You have the power," Loudoun snarled.

"Yet you crave the war—a war you would most assuredly lose."

"We have not yet lost," Loudoun snapped.

"You have not won."

"The Campbells are a force to be reckoned with."

"How many more of your men must die to prove that?"

The earl's mouth tightened.

"You need not love a single MacGregor for us to live in peace, Loudoun."

"We cannot live in peace."

"King George disagrees." Marcus motioned to the document.

"You may keep this copy. Copies have been sent to every Campbell leader of consequence."

Loudoun placed the tips of his fingers on the paper, then slowly slid it inch by inch into his hand until it formed a ball. He abruptly threw the paper at Marcus. Marcus didn't flinch when the paper rebounded from his chest and landed on the floor.

"A law purchased with Ashlund gold," Loudoun sneered.

Marcus held his gaze. It mattered not if Loudoun knew that half the Ashlund fortune had been the final bargaining price that induced King George to sign the law condemning both Campbell *and* MacGregor to death for murdering any man—or woman—from the opposing clan. A sense of weary finality washed over Marcus. Ashlund gold had bought MacGregor freedom, but it was the wisdom of one MacGregor so long ago that had illuminated this better path.

"Bought with MacGregor blood," Marcus murmured, then louder, "and Campbell blood."

The earl rose in one graceful motion. "Forgive me, Lord Ashlund, but I find it likely King George will countermand this foolishness with the next turn of wind. He will find fault with you *and* your clan soon enough."

Marcus gave a short laugh. "I wager King George would be just as pleased to find fault with you as he would with me."

Loudoun's face reddened. He whirled and headed for the door.

"Loudoun," Marcus called.

The earl halted and faced him.

"I will make sure King George enforces this edict."

Loudoun's lip curled upward. "Even if it takes *every last* crown in the Ashlund vault."

"Even if it takes every last crown."

Loudoun turned and left the room.

Only a moment passed before the library door opened again. Marcus turned from staring at the hearth and smiled as Elise's head appeared around the edge of the door.

"I saw the earl leave," she said. "How did the meeting go?"

"As to be expected."

"Your son is waiting to speak with you."

Marcus raised a brow. "Why not come himself?"

She laughed, opening the door another inch but didn't enter. "He tells me you forbade him so many things when he last saw you he fears forgetting one of your rules."

"He has done as I instructed and we're in London, after all. He has free reign here." Marcus grimaced. "Nay, 'tis best you not repeat that." He regarded her. "Do you intend on standing in the doorway the entire day?"

Elise blushed and opened the door fully. She wore a simple gown of soft turquoise muslin. This was the most festive dress she had worn since returning from Boston. Perhaps she was truly beginning to forgive herself—and him. The softness in her eyes gave him hope.

She remained in the doorway. "I'll send Kiernan to you."

"Will you return later?" Marcus asked as she started to turn.

She looked at him. Her expression displayed some of the shy reticence he had seen during those first months at Brahan Seer

"Perhaps," she replied with the hint of a smile, and turned to close the door.

Marcus's gaze fell upon the mail he had received just before Loudoun arrived. A letter from Boston lay at the bottom of the mix.

"Elise," he called.

She paused and looked over her shoulder.

"Have Kiernan meet me in the stables in fifteen minutes. I have something to attend to and I planned a ride before lunch. He can accompany me."

She nodded and left him alone.

Marcus seated himself at his desk and fished the Boston letter from the pile. He tore open the envelope and removed a letter, two folded newspaper clippings, and a sealed envelope addressed to Elise. He laid the two letters aside and unfolded one of the newspaper clippings. The title read:

November 10, 1826

The Wellington *leaves Boston harbor carrying twenty-five American convicts headed for Australia.*

Marcus scanned the report, which listed the twenty-five men, their crimes, and sentences.

He picked up the second clipping and unfolded it. The report read:

November 10, 1826

BOSTON SHIPPING MOGUL MISSING

Boston shipping mogul Price Ardsley, recently charged by the board of directors of Landen Shipping with fraud, has been missing since November 9. Landen Shipping contends that Ardsley fled the country to avoid prosecution.

The night Price Ardsley disappeared, Mister Jacob O'Riley reported witnessing two men outside Ardsley's estate accost a lone rider. A hood was thrown over the victim's head, then he was tied and thrown into the back of a carriage driven by his two assailants.

William Sheldon of the Boston Police Department interviewed Mister O'Riley but determined the event O'Riley witnessed is not connected with the disappearance of Price Ardsley.

Anyone having information about Mister Ardsley's whereabouts is directed to report to Captain Sheldon immediately.

Marcus reread the first clipping. *Price Ardsley in Australia.* Heated satisfaction shot through him. So, he would not have to return to America after all. He refolded the two clippings, slipped them back in their envelope, then opened the letter and began reading.

Ashlund,

Six weeks have passed, and I am fully recovered from the knife wound you inflicted. Had the doctors not insisted on the long convalescence, I would have caught the next ship bound for Scotland and run a dagger through your leg for good measure.

I imagine you've read the newspaper clippings I sent. Strange things are afoot. I can't say what lies ahead. Though I feel certain Price Ardsley won't be in a position to pay anyone to kill another man—or two men, as the case may be—again in the near future.

See that Elise gets the letter addressed to her.

Take care of her.

Steven

Marcus refolded the letter and placed it in the envelope with the clippings. He took the letter addressed to Elise and went to her chambers. He sighed upon finding her room empty. Perhaps when he returned she would be here and… He left the letter on her dresser, then headed for the stables.

Marcus heard the approach of footsteps even as Elise called out his name. He exchanged a glance with Kiernan before turning from the stall where his son was saddling the stallion he had chosen to ride. As she hurried down the stable aisle toward them, Marcus's heart began to hammer out the heavy beat he had been experiencing more and more of late when in her presence. He noticed a letter—Steven's letter—tightly clutched in her hand.

Elise had nearly reached them when she lifted the letter. "This came today?"

"Aye," Marcus replied.

"Steven says he is fully recovered and out of the hospital." She

stopped beside Marcus. Her expression clouded over. "Marcus, please, don't lie. How bad was the wound? Is it possible he truly is out of danger?"

"I told you the truth, love," he said. *Except for the fact Steven had turned at just the wrong moment and the knife Marcus had thrown pierced the breastbone above the heart instead of his arm, as intended.* Marcus shuddered inwardly as he always did when remembering how close he came to killing his wife's brother—and how close the brother came to killing his own son.

"The wound wasn't life threatening." *Or so the doctors said two days later, when Steven began to show signs of recovering from the loss of blood.* Marcus would have arrived back in Scotland a week earlier had he not tarried in Boston to assure himself the boy would recover.

Kiernan stuck his head out the stall. Elise jumped, bumping into the small table against the wall. The brush and trimming scissors lying on the table skittered across its surface. She quickly righted the table before they fell to the floor and looked at Kiernan. He flushed and Marcus knew his son was remembering his part in nearly getting killed, *and* nearly getting Steven killed. Marcus had also feared Elise wouldn't forgive Kiernan's part in her brother's brush with death. But she had, or so her warmth toward the boy seemed to indicate.

Would her warmth eventually extend to him? Would she forgive him? He wouldn't forget the sight of her pale face when he told her how Kiernan had saved him and Steven from Price's assassins, and how Steven had mistaken Kiernan for those assassins. When Marcus gave her the short letter Steven had written for her, she noted the shaky hand the letter had been written in and wouldn't be completely consoled—until today.

She blushed in response to Kiernan's embarrassment, and Marcus's body pulsed. He suddenly wished his son far away. Perhaps, if he and Elise were alone, she might allow him to make love to her. Marcus turned to Kiernan.

"Mayhap you should go on without me." He looked at Elise. "Will you walk with me?"

She looked as though he had asked her to puzzle out the secret of the universe, and Marcus repressed a laugh. He extended his hand. She slipped her hand into his. He glimpsed a figure entering the door at the far end of the stables as they turned to leave.

"Silas," he called after the new stable hand, "see to Alexis. I won't be taking him out as planned." Marcus turned back to Elise and urged her toward the door at the far end of the stables. "Did Steven have much to say?" he asked.

"He will return to duty in the Army." She hesitated. "He mentioned Price is missing."

"He cannot harm us, Elise."

Her gaze swung to his face. Her brow furrowed, then she nodded. They exited the door and took a few steps down the path before she exclaimed, "The letter!" and broke free of his hold on her hand. "I must have dropped it."

"Elise," he called, but she had already disappeared back into the stables. Bloody hell, at this rate it would be another six weeks before he got his wife back to the house, much less into his bed. He strode back inside the stables.

His heart jumped into his throat. In the instant before he broke into a run toward Elise, he took in the sight of Kiernan riding through the stable doors, Silas stepping from the stall next to the door, knife poised for throwing, and Elise grabbing the trimming scissors from the table. She hurled them toward Silas as she had thrown the *sgian dubh* that day at Brahan Seer.

The scissors hit their intended victim with deadly accuracy between the shoulder blades. Blood darkened the dirty shirt he wore. Silas faltered and turned, eyes wide with surprise. His expression contorted into rage. He roared and lunged toward her. Kiernan whirled his mount around to face the sudden commotion. His gaze met Marcus's, then Kiernan shouted and dug his heels into his horse's ribs. The beast's nostrils flared as he dipped his head and charged. Marcus forced his legs to pump harder. Silas would still reach Elise before either of them did.

She pivoted and grabbed the hoof pick hanging on the wall. The hair on Marcus's neck rose when Silas clutched at her. She swung the hoof pick. Kiernan reached them as she slashed Silas's arm. The horse slammed into Silas and he was knocked forward and into Elise. He grabbed her, but Marcus leapt between them, shoving her behind him. The table crashed onto its side and Elise cried out. Marcus seized Silas's collar and pounded his fist into the man's jaw.

"Father," Kiernan shouted as he leapt from his horse.

Marcus swung Silas around and sent him flying through the door of the stall. Silas banged into the wall and crumbled to the ground. Marcus whirled to face Elise. His breath came in quick, deep gasps—much like hers. She met his gaze, eyes blazing. He looked at Silas. The scissors had fallen from his back onto the straw-laden ground beside him. Marcus looked back at Elise.

"You never told me where you learned to throw a knife like that!" he shouted.

She blinked as if yanked from a dream. "Steven—" her voice caught, but Marcus realized it was the last vestiges of fear—and rage. "Steven learned as a young boy. I-I always feared he would hurt himself, so I attended his practices."

Elise yanked her skirt above her ankles and strode to the stall opening. She stared at Silas, her hands clenched on the fistful of skirt she held. She pivoted as Marcus stepped up behind her and collided with him. He grasped her shoulders.

She grabbed his arms as though to steady herself. "Will we ever be free of him?"

In her eyes, Marcus saw the fear he had felt when he saw Silas poised to murder his son. Marcus glanced around and spotted the bucket of water he was looking for several stalls down. He fetched it, then pushed past Elise and Kiernan and threw the water on the unconscious man. Silas awoke with a sputter. Marcus seized him by his collar and yanked him to his feet.

"Who sent you?" Marcus shouted.

Silas cowed.

"Tell me or I'll kill you here and now."

"That woman." Silas cringed.

"Woman?" Marcus gave him a hard shake.

Silas went silent.

"Kiernan! Give me your pistol."

"No," Silas cried.

Marcus lifted his fist for another blow.

"Ross!" Silas shouted. "Lady Ross."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Elise stilled at the sound of Marcus's bedchamber door opening. She rose and stole through the closet which separated their two rooms, then knocked lightly on his door, and entered. He looked up from where he stood near the nightstand on the far side of the bed. Her heart lurched. She had suspected he kept a mistress, but seeing him now, hair tousled, cravat missing, the top button of his shirt undone, there was no mistaking the fact he had just risen from another woman's bed. The mental picture of Marcus kissing the rise of her breasts, then taking her nipple into his mouth filled her vision.

"Elise?"

She snapped back to the present. "I—" Her gaze caught on his hands—hands that had once touched her, had once—the urge to cry sprang up. No, she wouldn't cry. She had made her bed. She would live with the consequences.

"I wondered how things went with Lady Ross's trial," she said. "Is it over?"

Marcus reached around his back and pulled out the revolver stuffed into his waistband.

Where had the revolver lain when he made love to his mistress?

"It is over," he replied. "She claims to know nothing of a plot to kill Kiernan." Marcus glanced at her. "I suspect she wanted you dead. Though she denies that as well. I don't know how, but it is clear she was in league with Ardsley. Margaret had no reason to kill Kiernan."

Elise started to ask how he could be so sure when he said, "She won't face prison." He gave a mirthless laugh. "England is not about to put one of her noblewomen in prison, even if she is Scottish. She is to go to America." Marcus's expression abruptly darkened. "Do you intend on standing in doorways the remainder of our marriage?"

She blinked.

"Or is it that you simply find it too abhorrent to be in a room with me?"

"I… no. I only thought—"

"Thought what?" he demanded.

"I didn't want to intrude. It is late—"

"So it is." Marcus began unbuttoning his shirt.

"Good Lord," she muttered. "It's not as if you have invited me into your bed—chambers." She added "chambers" in a rush, seeing his fingers halt on the third button and the sudden gleam in his eyes.

His eyes narrowed. "Am I to understand it is I who have stayed out of *your* bed?"

"You say that as if you're surprised," she snapped.

"By God," he thundered. "I will settle this now." He started around the bed.

Elise rolled her eyes. "You have no energy to *settle* anything."

He stopped short. "What the blazes does that mean?"

"It means, I have made my bed and I'll lie in it." *Alone.*

Marcus charged across the room. Elise backed up. He grabbed her and tossed her on *his* bed before she could blink. His lips crashed down on hers in a bruising kiss. Shock ripped through her. Energy pooled in the pit of her stomach, then between her legs. His hand covered a breast. Elise arched into him. She wanted him, but could she live with the fact he had another woman? He yanked up her night rail and reached between her legs. *Yes.* She could live with anything if she had him. His fingers probed. Marcus abruptly pulled away from her.

He touched her cheek. "Steven is well," he said. "There is no need to cry."

"Cry?" She lifted a finger to her cheek, but even as she did, she realized she was crying.

"Unless…" Marcus said.

Elise looked at him.

"You can't forgive me for Steven. I am sorry. I understood the consequences. I could not change—"

"Forgive *you*," she interrupted. "You have done nothing to forgive. It's my fault, even your taking a mistress. I can't blame you for wanting—"

"A what?" He looked startled.

"What?" she repeated.

His brows puckered in a fierce frown. "We have been in Ashlund two weeks and already you have me consorting with other women?"

"There's no better explanation for the late nights, your state of dishevelment."

"My state of dishevelment?" His gaze swept across her body. "You seem to have forgotten what my *state of dishevelment* is like when I make love to a woman." He kissed her mouth, her cheek, her ear. "When I make love to you," he whispered.

Elise drew a sharp breath as he rocked against her. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"There is no more Margaret," he whispered. "No more Ardsley, and"—Marcus slid a hand beneath her and lifted her hips to meet each thrust of his hips—"there is no mistress."

He pulled his arm from around her, then reached between them and unfastened his trousers. His erection sprang free of its constraints and Marcus drove himself into her.

"There is only you," he said, and began the rhythm that bound them together as one.

####

I hope you enjoyed Marcus and Elise's journey of discovery and love in My Highland Love. Feel free to drop me a line and let me know what you thought of the book. Take a peek at my Scottish Historical *Lord Keeper*.

Tarah

Scottish Highlands 1508

CHAPTER ONE

Iain might have been standing on the edge of a dream when the abbey door opened and she stepped out into the morning light. Though separated by a small earthly measure of holy ground, he sensed her mind to be as far from him as heaven was from hell. His heart stilled with the sudden blaze of auburn hair against the Highland sun and he determined to learn what color eyes matched such fire.

With a nod in response to Father Brennan's statement that the Menzies clan was rumored to be raiding land to the north, Iain slid a hand along his horse's neck. The beast nickered and shifted beneath him. An answering whinny followed from one of his men's horses behind him. Careful not to give away his intention, Iain slid his gaze across the heather covered hills in the background, and covertly monitored the woman's progress as she strolled along the grounds, a book in hand. Another moment and she would be off Montrose Abbey.

She slowed.

Annoyance flared. Curse the archaic law that kept her safe on holy ground. What if he ignored the civilized directives instilled by his education, and simply took her? He dropped his attention to the intricately carved leather wristband that covered his arm from wrist to elbow. A deep scratch spanned the leather, a reminder of the battle that almost took his arm, had taken the lives of many good men, a battle fought in the name of *justice*.

Iain looked up in response to Father Brennan's report that four Menzies clansmen had passed the abbey yesterday afternoon. He was in no mood to encounter marauding Menzies on his return home, particularly considering his change in plans. He breathed deep of the Scots pine scent carried on the keening wind. The law forbade him taking the woman while on holy ground, but sanctioned the kidnapping once she entered the outside world. No law would be broken, no war begun when he claimed her.

Ticking off the seconds in his mind, he gauged her progress away from the grassy expanse that marked the distance needed to intercept her race back to the monastery. Any resistance would be hampered by the heavy skirts of her expensive brocade dress. She took the last fateful step. Iain flashed Father Brennan a grin as he grasped the hook on his claymore's scabbard and unhooked latch from hook. Sword and scabbard dropped to the ground. The priest's eyes registered surprise, then understanding. He whirled as Iain dug his

heels into the horse's belly and broke ranks with his men.

"Run!" the priest shouted.

She looked up from her book. In seconds, Iain drew close enough to discern the expression of a doe catching first sight of the bowman. His heart surged. Mayhap the wide-eyed stare wasn't fear, but fascination? Understanding lit her features and Iain laughed at his folly. The doe realized the bowman meant to have her, after all.

She dropped the book and yanked up her skirts to run. Iain veered right and leaned from the saddle as she darted left. He seized her waist. She gave a muffled 'oof' and kicked when he dragged her against the side of the galloping beast, her legs tangled in her skirts. The horse snorted, his gait faltering with the uneven burden; he steadied and Iain hauled her across his thighs.

His groin pulsed with the weight of her derriere across his lap. He laughed to himself. If she understood the pleasure her struggles afforded him, she would cease. His horse snorted and Iain threw a leg over the lass' shins, hugging them close to the belly of the beast. She grunted with the effort of trying to slide from the saddle, then stiffened with his firm grip on her thigh.

"Iain," Father Brennan said in a loud voice.

Iain forced his attention from the disheveled mass of velvet hair that cascaded down slim shoulders and looked to where the priest had retreated onto holy ground. Father Brennan motioned him forward. Iain smiled and gave a shake of his head. The hand at Father Brennan's side fisted.

Good. The priest understood no MacPherson would set foot on holy ground today.

The woman's muscles tightened in another attempt to throw off his leg, and Iain gave the flesh a warning squeeze without breaking eye contact with Father Brennan. The priest ran the back of a forefinger in a slow line along each side of his mustache. Iain understood his shrewd look, but the curiosity in his eyes was a surprise. He strode toward them, and the warriors who had ridden in with Iain drew up alongside as the priest neared.

"It doesna' seem she is taken with your charm, Iain," Father Brennan said.

"Charm?" his captive snapped. "What madness is this?"

"Patience, lass. It is a simple mistake." The priest looked pointedly at Iain.

"Aye," she blurted, "and this barbarian would do well to release me before he discovers just how grave a mistake."

Iain glanced at his companions when someone unsuccessfully stifled mirth.

Father Brennan clicked his tongue with impatience. "Iain, you

cannot take her."

Iain responded with a raise of his brows.

"Aye, then," Father Brennan muttered, "you can take her, but 'tis not fair play. I had not informed her of this *tradition*. A tradition long dead," he added with asperity.

"I believe it was you who said ignorance of the law is no excuse," Iain reminded him with a low laugh.

Father Brennan hesitated. "You must know she is English. Are you sure you want her?"

The lady gasped. Iain started to demanded explanation for the slur, but forestalled at something unknown in the priest's demeanor and replied in an unruffled tone, "If I did not want her, I would not have taken her."

Relief flickered in Father Brennan's eyes, but his voice remained insistent. "This is wrong. She did not know it was unsafe to step from holy ground."

"Unsafe?" Iain echoed.

Father Brennan's expression darkened. "You heard what I said, Iain MacPherson, unsafe."

"Is she entering the convent?" Father Brennan's frown deepened, and Iain added, "It is, no doubt, a grievous sin to lie about such matters."

"*By the saints.* Nay, you scoundrel, she has no such intentions."

"Why is she here?"

"Sweet Jesu," the lady cursed. "What concern is that of yours?"

Iain shifted his gaze to her. Fury ruled her gaze, but it was the challenge in the lift of her chin that gripped his heart. "Where is your husband, lass?"

Silence hung thick in the air and every nerve stood ready for the answer he dreaded, hadn't considered, until this moment.

"In a grave in England," she answered at last.

That was unexpected and Iain wasn't sure whether to praise God she was free, or feel compassion she had lost a loved one. Guilt surfaced with the realization that he gladly chose the former. He wheeled his horse around.

"Nay!" She kicked the stallion's belly.

The beast reared. Iain yanked back on the reins, but she kicked again. The stallion reared a second time. Iain seized the pommel, but felt their bodies slipping from the saddle. He rolled, hugging her close so that she landed on top of him as they crashed to the moist ground. She shoved away from him. He held tight, laughing in spite of the dull pain in his shoulder when she growled. She jabbed an elbow into his ribs. Pain lanced through his gut. His grip faltered and she broke free. The closest of the warriors shot after her and was upon her in a few

short strides and grabbed her.

Iain leapt to his feet and lunged after her. “Release her!”

The man dropped her. She jumped up, tripped on her skirts, and barely scrambled up again as Iain brought her down like a wild animal.

He flipped her over and straddled her. “I should have let you break *my* fall.”

She grabbed his shoulders and dug nails into the hard muscle. Iain seized her wrists and shoved them above her head. He slid his body along hers until he covered her length and his face was an inch from her mouth. She continued to struggle.

His groin thickened. “At least you might have been knocked senseless long enough for me to get you to my bed and shackle you there.”

She stilled, eyes wide. Regret stabbed at him. He had enjoyed the thrust of her slim hips against him.

The lower edge of Father Brennan’s scapula came into view beside them. “Let her up, Iain.”

Iain shook his head. “Nay. I am enjoying this more than anything else this morning.”

A round of approving grunts and laughter went up from his men. As an afterthought, Iain lowered his mouth on hers. She stiffened, but the scent of rose water mingling with the heather crushed beneath her assailed his senses and he breathed in the arousing scents. Shifting, he found the curves of her body held the expected promise. He couldn’t help a glance in the direction of the forest where privacy lay but a moment away.

“MacPherson,” the priest growled.

Iain jerked his gaze back onto her. Fear tinged her expression. A twinge of guilt gave way to the desire to kiss away the small tremor on her lower lip.

“*Iain*.”

“Aye.” He rose, pulling her to her feet.

She bolted, but he yanked her to his side.

“*Please.”* She worked to pry his hands from her arm as he led her in the direction of his horse.

The desperation in her voice halted Iain’s march.

Father Brennan gave her a fatherly pat on the arm. “All will be well, lass.”

She scowled. “What an absurd statement.”

Iain laughed and received a kick to the shin for the offense.

“I am to blame, child.” Father Brennan sighed. “I did not warn you to remain on holy ground when we had *visitors*.”

Iain angled his head in acknowledgement, then faced her. His

brief inspection earlier suggested her long skirts hid feminine curves and shapely legs. Yet, her carriage had intrigued him above all. A woman of intellect and gentle breeding, she would suit him well. To his surprise, she had spared but a cursory glance in his direction before turning back to her book.

He touched the spot where cheekbone met eyes. “As blue as the waters of Loch Ericht.”

Startled understanding appeared in the blue depths and satisfaction rippled through Iain. Luck was with him today, luck and his captain’s suggestion that he visit Montrose Abbey to investigate rumors of trouble with the Menzies.

Her eyes narrowed. She shoved his hand away and faced Father Brennan. “You are saying that because I took one step too many in the wrong direction this . . . this *man* can take me and I have nothing to say about it?”

“Well, ’twas more than one,” Father Brennan corrected.

She gave an unladylike snort.

“Lass,” Iain cut in. “I am Iain MacPherson, leader of my clan. I will provide you a fine home and swear by God to keep you safe.”

Her severe expression turned with deliberation on him. “King are you—”

“Clan chief,” he corrected. “A difference King James is sure to appreciate.”

She raised a scornful brow. “*That* gives you the right to take me prisoner?”

“Nay, my lass.” Iain yanked her to his chest. “The fact I am a man gives me that right.”

Determined fury darkened her eyes. He tangled a hand in the soft tresses behind her neck and pulled her mouth to his. She shoved at his chest. Iain tasted her with slow consideration, not forcing the tightly clamped lips apart, despite the compelling desire to thrust his tongue inside. The length of him hardened to near pain and his heart pounded at breakneck speed, but he ended the kiss. She twisted in an effort to free herself, yet Iain didn’t miss the tremble in her body.

“Nathan, fetch my horse.”

The young warrior broke from the band and, a moment later, brought the horse up alongside, with Iain’s sword strapped to its side.

“Hold fast the reins.”

Nathan complied and Iain lifted her. She braced her hands against the horse’s ribs, but he hoisted her into the saddle.

“You will keep her?” Father Brennan crossed his arms over his chest.

“Aye.” Iain kept an arm around her waist as she tried to slide down the opposite side.

The priest nodded. “Since you take advantage of her stepping from holy ground, you will abide by the law and wait until she consents.”

“She will wed me of her own free will,” Iain stepped into the saddle and encircled her waist as he took the reins that were handed to him.

“That is not what I mean and you know it.”

“I do not force women,” Iain replied.

“Perhaps because no woman has ever refused you before?”

Iain locked gazes with the priest. “Beware that your good intentions do not take you too far, Father. You know I have never taken an unwilling woman.”

“Liar,” the lady interjected.

Iain leaned her back in his arm and stared into her eyes. “You do not know me, lass. Why say such a thing?”

“I am unwilling, yet you force me to go with you.”

For an instant her logic confused him and memory of another woman made captive by a man who claimed love flitted through his mind. “Aye,” Iain agreed, through tight lips. “But you will choose to marry me.” He gave a quiet order to one of his men and pulled on the reins, once again wheeling his horse away from the abbey. “Come to us in ten days, Father,” Iain threw back before they were out of earshot.

“He will only come to bring me back,” she said through clenched teeth. “I will never marry you.”

About the Author

Award-winning, published author Tarah Scott cut her teeth on authors such as Georgette Heyer, Zane Grey, and Amanda Quick. Her favorite book is *A Tale of Two Cities*, with *Gone With the Wind* as a close second. She writes classical romance, suspense, horror and mainstream.

Born in New Mexico, Tarah grew up in the Southwest. Fifteen years ago, she relocated to Westchester County, New York, where she and her daughter reside in a lakeside community. Don't be fooled by what sounds like a quiet life. The city that never sleeps is only an hour away, and this Texas girl and her New York bred daughter wouldn't have it any other way.

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Also by Tarah Scott

Claimed

Sometimes, the hero must be the villain...

Fourteen months ago, Lady Rhoslyn lost her husband and infant son to a fever. Now, by order of King Edward I, she is yanked from the healing tranquility of a convent to marry the king's favored bastard knight. Rhoslyn has no intention of returning to the home where her husband and child died. Neither does she intend to hand over her fortune to the 'Dragon'—no matter his sweet promises and warm kisses.

Talbot St. Claire tires of war. Seventeen years is enough. King Edward will never release him from service, but the king promises Talbot will find some peace in front of his own hearth. Talbot expects to find a horse-faced, hostile woman in the Scottish heiress Edward commands him to marry. Instead, he discovers a fiery Highland beauty worthy of a man's respect...and love. Talbot determines to do anything to win his new bride's acceptance. Anything except the one thing she demands: betray his king and embrace his Scottish heritage.

My Highland Love

Voted Indie Romance Convention Readers Choice Award's best historical romance of 2013

How does a woman tell her betrothed that she murdered her first husband?

Shipwrecked in the Scottish Highlands, American heiress Elise Kingston quietly plans revenge for the deaths of her daughter and the brother who sacrificed his life to save her.

When Marcus MacGregor, Marquess of Ashlund, returns to his Highland home to discover a stunning American woman has been taken in by his clan, his attraction is instant and he resolves to make her his—no matter what secret she's keeping.

Elise is shocked by her need for Marcus and, too late, discovers that her feelings make him a target of her enemy—a man powerful enough to destroy even a Scottish nobleman.

My Highland Lord

London Heiress kidnapped by the Marquess of Ashlund, read the headlines. Yet no one tried to save her.

Phoebe Wallington was seven years old when a mass assassination attempt rocked Regency England. Her father was the only accused traitor to elude capture. Seventeen years later, the one man who could prove her father's innocence is dead. Now as a grown woman and a British spy, she's no closer to learning what really happened that day.

Phoebe's quest for the truth takes a sudden turn when she's kidnapped by a suspected traitor. But Kiernan MacGregor, the Marquess of Ashlund, may not live long enough to stand trial. Someone wants him dead…and Phoebe stands in the killer's way. The only way to save her reputation and protect Kiernan is to marry him.

Lord Keeper

No man bargains for war when he chooses a bride, but when he steals her from holy ground, he can expect nothing less.

A midnight race for freedom leads Victoria Hockley, the Countess of Lansbury, to a churchyard deep in the Scottish Highlands. But not even hallowed ground can save her from the devil who's pursued her from England, or from the furious Scot who swears to protect her.

Iain MacPherson swore he was nothing like his father, but his kidnapping of Victoria Hockley shows the same kind of obsessive jealousy that sent his mother to an early grave. Now Iain has hell to pay, and the devil may very well be the noble English lass who has bewitched his very soul…

A Knight of Passion

Lady Riana Ellis will risk the fires of Hell for those she loves.

Can she let a man do the same for her?

As whore for the Duchess of Arundel, Lady Riana Ellis keeps her sister safe from the duke's lascivious desires. Now the duchess demands that Riana murder the man already sent to her bed.

Sir Bryant Cullen determines to have the duchess' whore. Her land is a prize, but it's her secrets he wants. Once he knows what she knows, he will control one of the most powerful houses in Scotland. And she will be his.

This is erotic romance

The Pendulum: Legacy of the Celtic Brooch

Two Men.

Two murderers.

Two demands for the promised payment of marriage.

Murder, deceit, and fraud pull Lady Arin Keith between these men.

Which one will bed her, claim her...own her?

When a Rose Blooms

This is a twenty page short story.

On the fifth year anniversary of Margaret Moncreiffe's death, her husband Nathaniel kneels at her grave, asking the questions he fears were answered the night she died of a mysterious fever. As the evening progresses, however, a flesh and blood woman enters the battlefield he has created around his heart, forcing him to choose between life among the living, or life with nothing but memories of the dead.

Seduced

It's a Mississippi Deputy Sheriff's duty to bring a serial killer to justice… even when he's a three hundred year old Scottish lord. It's an SAS agent's duty to save her.

With each passing day, Lord Colin Morrison grows more furious...and

more desperate. In three hundred years, not one of the women who shared his bed broke the spell that imprisoned him in Castle Morrison. Margot Saulnier is different. She can save him. All she has to do is give in to her desire for him. Then die.

Deputy Sheriff Margot Saulnier knows her best friend murdered her husband—Margot's cousin—but she can't prove it. Now, four years later, out of the blue, Cat calls Margot from Scotland and invites her to visit. Margot turns in her badge and leaves Mississippi. This time, she'll do whatever it takes to prove Cat murdered Donny. Margot didn't plan on falling in love with an SAS Agent—or a three-hundred-year-old Scottish lord. Now she must choose.

SAS Agent Charles McNeil is going to keep Margot Saulnier out of trouble—whether she likes it or not. He understands her need for justice, but with no proof and no authority, she's headed for serious trouble. So is he. Charles didn't plan on falling in love with Margot. Neither did he plan on saving her from a serial killer.
He's just a legend.

And magick doesn't exist.

The Highlander's Improper Wife

A proper young lady should never attend a Masque...Aphrodite is no lady.

Betrothal to the callous Lord Blackhall painted a future devoid of love. Upon his death, Lady Caroline Wilmont is promised to the younger brother. Caroline refuses to allow her first taste of desire to be at the hands of a man who would rather have any woman but her. This, her last night of freedom, is to be a memory of lust that she can take with her throughout her loveless marriage. As Aphrodite, Caroline attends a masque determined to find a man to initiate her into the intimacies of erotic love.

Taran Robertson, Viscount of Blackhall, makes no secret that he despises his obligation to marry the Sassenach heiress chosen for him by his father. As a last foray before his wedding, he attends a masque. However, the spirited vixen he meets and seduces has secrets...secrets that just may reveal he's to have an improper wife.

Double Bang!

Sara Martin has a problem. And it's not the attraction she has for her co-worker Devon Curran…or the lust she feels for her sexy neighbor, Rigg. Yes, those are problems. But she has bigger issues. There's been a security breach in the impenetrable computer system at work. Suddenly Devon doesn't look happy. And that is a gun in his pocket!

Devon is working undercover…and Sara is about to blow his case. He'd rather she blow him. She's as smart as she is beautiful. But he's lied to protect her. What will she do when she discovers he works with a partner? Tonight, they are going to keep her close…very close…in their protective custody.

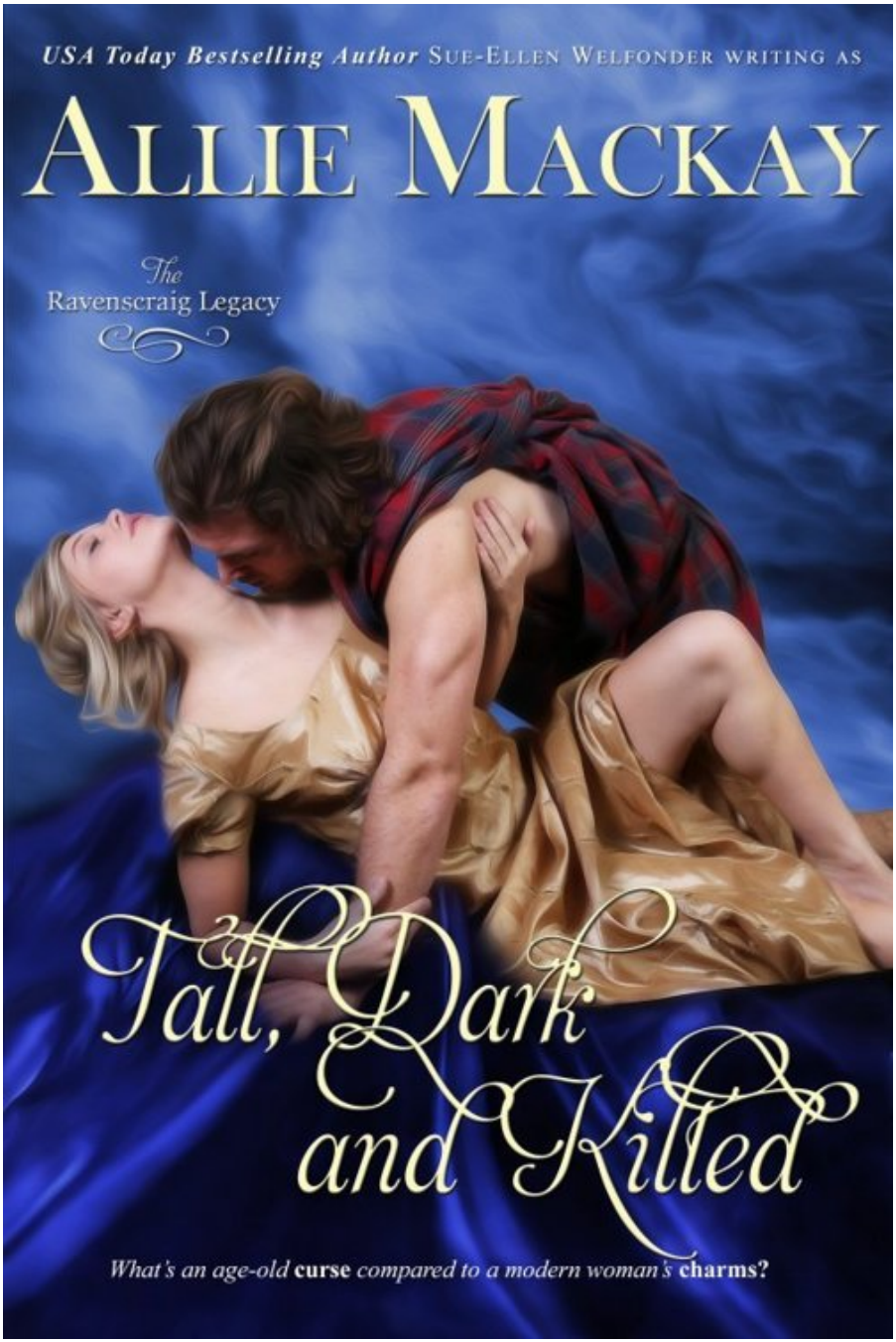
Born Into Fire

Ryalda - the Element heroes of old - leak from the dark void of nothingness, Ghen, and bring with them beauty, desire... and destruction.

Air Element, Erion aches to feel the heat of Kenna's emerging fire. However, merging his wind with the woman on the cusp of transformation comes with great risk. A risk he's unwilling to take. But with a male Fire Element intent on enslaving Kenna, Erion reconsiders his vow. To protect her, they must merge, but he will not bond his wind with her fire.

Aspiring glassblower, Kenna Lang finally has a showing that could launch her career - with Drakaura, blown glass replicas of the dragons of her dreams. A chance meeting with Erion ignites an attraction hotter than the furnace used to blow glass. Drawn into an erotic joining, Kenna is born into fire. Now her world is going up in flames.

Merged as Air and Fire, their power is unimaginable. However, both are unprepared for the emotions awakened by their joining and the timeless battle waged against them. Only together can they defeat their enemies, both Element and Dragon, and escape the darkness of Ghen.


USA Today Bestselling Author Sue-Ellen Welfonder writing as
Allie Mackay
The Ravenscraig Legacy
Tall, Dark and Kilted
What's an age-old curse compared to a modern woman's charms?

Tall, Dark, and Kilted

The Ravenscraig Legacy
Book Three

By Allie Mackay

Allie Mackay is a pseudonym for USA Today Bestselling Author, Sue-Ellen Welfonder

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What's an age-old curse compared to a modern woman's charm?

A good man is hard to find.

Cilla Swanner has been jilted by her lover, and she is struggling with a jewelry business that's far from sparkling. She needs a getaway someplace quiet and remote. Someplace like Dunroamin Castle in Scotland, where her aunt and uncle run a retirement home in the majestic Highlands. But what she finds there may be more than she can handle.

Or is it the other way around?

Centuries ago, the roguish Scots knight known as Hardwick was renowned for his swordmanship, both on and off the battlefield. But a traveling bard cursed him to wander the world forever, pleasing a different woman each night with no hope of fulfillment or true love. Then Hardwick meets Cilla, who may be his only chance for salvation.

Praise for Allie Mackay

"Charming and innovative, Mackay definitely delivers a blast of Scottish steam." ~ Publishers Weekly

"I'd follow Allie Mackay's hot Scots anywhere!" ~ Vicki Lewis Thompson, New York Times Bestselling Author

"Allie Mackay pens stories that sparkle." ~ Angela Knight, New York Times Bestselling Author

"Mackay knows what a Scottish romance novels needs, and socks it to you!" ~ A Romance Review

"If you want a fun and passionate ghost love story, look no further than Allie Mackay!" ~ Sapphire Romance Realm

Praise for Tall, Dark, and Kilted

"TALL, DARK, AND KILTED is an imaginative, intriguing, and sensuous novel. It's also connected to HIGHLANDER IN HER DREAMS which Romance Reviews Today recommends highly. All of Mackay's titles exhibit the author's knowledge and love of Scotland and its Highlanders."
~ Romance Reviews Today

“This was a heartwarming tale of forbidden love packed with hilarious situations and wonderful secondary characters. It left me feeling that no matter how unattainable something may seem, if our heart and soul want something bad enough, nothing is beyond reach.”
~ Leah Weller ‘Medieval Lady,’ Reviewer for Bookworm2bookworm

“TALL, DARK, and KILTED is full of Chills, Thrills and Giggles!”
~ Seawitch Reviews

“Engaging, romantic, with a touch of mystery and a terrific twist. Brisk and breezing, from the moment the ghost and the American meet, it never slows down.”
~ Genre Go Round Reviews

“TALL, DARK AND KILTED is outlandishly funny one minute and seductively sensual the next.”
~ Wild on Books

“If you like books that will grab you, make you laugh out loud, and your heart go thud, you will love Allie Mackay. TALL, DARK, and KILTED is Hardwick’s Story.”
~ Night Owl Reviews

Praise for Some Like It Kilted

"A ghostly romance that transcends time."
Allie Mackay gears us up for another hauntingly sexy Scottish romp. She’s a master at penning magical tales of love across the ages, and this certainly is another gem.”
~ Fresh Fiction

“If you love to laugh out loud, fall in love, and reach for what you desire, this book is for you!”
~ Leah Weller ‘Medieval Lady,’ Reviewer for Bookworm2bookworm

“Perfect for a weekend’s escape. Mackay’s humor is sprinkled throughout, making the book a fun read. She skillfully weaves the elements of reincarnation, time travel and ghostly happenings into a well told story.
Bran of Barra is one of the most compelling heroes I’ve read in some time. His innate sensuality sprang off the page. I wouldn’t mind having him show up in my bedroom to carry me back in time to his castle.”

~ Love Romances & More

“A great read! This is the fourth book in Allie Mackay’s wonderful Highland Ghost series and the one we’ve all been waiting for: Bran of Barra’s story! You will love this series especially if you are a die-hard Scottish fan.”
~ Sapphire Romance

Praise for Highlander in Her Dreams

Aidan is a Romantic Times K.I.S.S of the Month Hero!

“A treat. Cleverly plotted, innovative twists, and snappy dialogue. Highlander in Her Dreams is a fun, sexy story. HOT.” ~ Romantic Times Magazine

Highlander in Her Dreams is a RRAH ‘Top Pick’

“Sexy. Imaginative and fascinating. Mackay spins a magical tale where a modern woman falls in love with a medieval Scottish chieftain. A fascinating mix of exciting action and passionate romance makes HIGHLANDER IN HER DREAMS a real keeper.”
~ Romance Reader at Heart

“Highlander in Her Dreams brims with Scottish charm, humor, and hot romance.”
~ Night Owl Romance

"An enchanting time travel!"
~ ParaNormalRomance

“Highlander in Her Dreams is a pleasing blend of wit, passion, and the paranormal… a steamy romance that packs emotional punch.” ~ Romance Reviews Today

“A fabulous mixture of magic and romance. Allie Mackay has penned an enchanting romance of lovers from different times. Highlander in Her Dreams is a captivating paranormal romance and a wonderful addition to a book lover’s library.”
~ Fresh Fiction

Praise for Highlander in Her Bed

“Fun! A sexy, humor-filled romance with delightfully amusing characters. Artfully blending past and present, HIGHLANDER IN HER BED is an entertaining read. Well-written… readers will enjoy this one!”
~ Fresh Fiction

“Appealing and amusing. Sizzles with passion. For those looking for something out of the ordinary, don’t miss HIGHLANDER IN HER BED.”
~ Romance Reviews Today

“A whimsical read that will have you panting from start to finish! Red-hot chemistry ignites from the moment Sir Alex and Mara meet. A sure-bet bestseller.”
~ A Romance Review

"What a humorous and heart-pulling story! Two people who find each other across time and came to find that real love and a little magic can conquer all."
~ Leah Weller ‘Medieval Lady,’ Reviewer for Bookworm2bookworm

“A yummy paranormal romp!”
Angela Knight, New York Times Bestselling Author

“Delightful! Compelling, fun, and imaginative, with crisp dialogue and sexy, believable characters. Memorable. HOT.”
~ Romantic Times Magazine

“A superb paranormal romance.”
~ Midwest Book Review

"Who are you?" Cilla regarded him warily. "Where did you come from?"

"From a place more distant than you'd believe." He ignored her first question. "I've good advice for you. If you're after a true taste of Scotland, hie yourself-"

"Hie myself?" She blinked.

"Take yourself," he clarified, scowling. "Quit this place and journey south. Inverness, the Isle of Skye, Stirling and Perth, perhaps even down to Edinburgh. Or Glasgow. Aye" – he appeared to warm to the idea - "Glasgow is where you should be. Loch Lomond is there and-"

"I saw Loch Lomond on the drive up here." Cilla frowned back at him. "We stopped there for lunch and I've never seen so many tour buses. If that's Scotland" - she made a wide sweeping gesture with her arm, taking in the rain-dampened parapet – "I'd rather be here."

"Be warned then." He stepped closer, his dark gaze piercing her. "Sutherland is filled with lonely moors and dark bogs. Mountains so vast they'd eat a lass like you bones and all and no one would ever be the wiser."

"I like wild places." She tossed back her hair, defiant.

He snorted. "This is the end of the world."

Cilla smiled. "Exactly."

Dedication

For Herman

Herring gull, Hero, and Heartthrob. To some you might be ‘just a bird.’ But to me - and everyone who loves you – you’re a precious light in our lives. I sometimes wonder if you aren’t Gregor in disguise, somehow escaped from these pages. It wouldn’t surprise me. Here’s hoping you know how much we all care.

Acknowledgment

This book was originally released as a traditionally published title by Penguin NAL. Many thanks to Tarah Scott and Ceci Giltenan for their love and support on the journey to re-releasing this book. You ladies are my champions!

As always, much appreciation to my very handsome husband, Manfred, for his unflagging support and enthusiasm. My gray tabby, Snuggles, for being such a cool writer cat. He loves to hang out on my keyboard. And my beloved Jack Russell, Em. He owns my heart still and always will. There are no words for how much I miss him.

“There are men and there are Highlanders. Woe be to anyone fool enough not to know the difference.”

~ Bran of Barra, Hebridean chieftain, appreciator of women, and Highlander to the bone.

Prologue

In the Twilight World of the Great Beyond

"So you are tired of women?"

The disembodied voice boomed like a thousand angry thunderclouds. Loud and crackling, each word sent bolts of lightning sizzling through the shifting mist. Gray, swirling drifts, the fog shielded the Dark One's inner sanctum from the rest of this curious and mysterious place.

"I am weary of having to pleasure them." Sir Hardwin de Studley of Seagrave, more commonly known as Hardwick, put back his shoulders against the Dark One's wrath. "Enough is enough. Seven hundred years of nightly bliss would dampen any man's appetite."

Another earsplitting clap of thunder shook the cushiony mist beneath Hardwick's feet and a scorching bolt of lightning whizzed past his ear, its otherworldly heat almost singeing his hair.

"There are some who would call your curse a blessing." The Dark One's deep voice rumbled with displeasure. "Souls who would burn an eternity for a single eye-blink of the revels you enjoy each night."

"Bah!" Hardwick tightened his grip on the round, studded shield he always clutched before his groin. "I would roast for two eternities for the peace of one night's unbroken sleep." Keeping his stare on the immense stone temple he could just make out through the thick, swirling fog, he willed the Dark One to show himself.

Willed, as well, his *problem* to stop twitching in heated anticipation of the coming night's tumble with some as-yet-undetermined bit of eager, female fluff.

He would easily stride past an endless line of naked, writhing beauties if doing-so would grant him eternal rest and peace.

"You have only yourself to blame, Seagrave." Puffs of sulfurous smoke drifted out from behind the ancient, sentry-like trees guarding the Dark One's temple. "Had you not turned the wandering bard from your door, he would not have cast his wizard-spell on you."

Hardwick bit back a snort. "There were highborn guests at my table that night. It was known that an assassin guising himself as a traveling lute player had been trailing them. I did what any self-respecting lord of the Scottish realm would have done. I turned away a stranger in an attempt to safeguard those within my walls."

A gust of icy wind revealed the Dark One's opinion of his

choice.

Hardwick stood tall, refusing to acknowledge the frigid blast. "Would you have handled otherwise?"

"What I would have done scarce matters. I am not the one who was damned to spend eternity pleasing women without ever again enjoying my own release." A sound almost like derisive laughter came from within the mist-shrouded temple. "'Tis you who were doomed to roam the earth, satisfying a different woman every night."

"You needn't remind me." Hardwick glared into the mist. "I am well aware of the peculiarities of my circumstance."

If he weren't, the permanent annoyance at his groin was more than telling. Glancing down at the rigid protuberance, his mood worsened.

The Dark One gave a superior sigh. "Perhaps if you hadn't been one of Scotland's most notorious wenchers, the bard would have visited you with a less strenuous curse."

Hardwick considered throwing down his infernal shield and whipping out his sword. "Be that as it may, I would hear if you are willing to help me? I already know you have the power to do so."

"I have the means to undo the mortal magick of any medieval bard, including the wizardry of the one who cursed you. The power as to whether the counterspell works, lies with you."

"Then tell me what I must do."

"It is more what you must not do. Dare not do if you wish the resolution to help you."

Hardwick took a step closer to the temple, his own temples beginning to throb with frustration when the swirling mists thickened, giving the impression the blasted place was receding from him.

Halting, he tamped down his temper and held up a hand. The one he didn't need to hold his shield in place. "I will do – or not do – whatever is necessary to rid myself of this foul condition."

"So be it." The mists thinned, once again allowing glimpses of the Dark One's hallowed temple. "You shall be relieved of your curse and also granted the everlasting sleep you crave – if you can keep yourself from becoming aroused for a year and a day."

Hardwick almost laughed. "Think you that will be a problem? After centuries of such an affliction as I've endured? By the gray mists shielding you from me, I swear there isn't a female walking who could tempt me."

"Do not claim victory too soon, Seagrave." Another rush of icy air whipped through the inner sanctum, this time accompanied by a black, shrieking wind. Even more distressing, the tangle of exposed roots spreading out from the circle of guardian trees suddenly

morphed into hissing dragons. As one, they lifted scaly, black-glittering heads, looking round with fiery, unblinking eyes. "Be warned. The price of your redemption is high and fraught with grave danger."

Hardwick pitched his voice as resolute as the Dark One's. "Rid me of my problem and I will face any peril."

Drawing his sword, he thrust its tip into the billowing mist rippling around his ankles. "With the greatest respect," he said, watching the root dragons stare at him with eyes like glimmering coals, "I'll not be deterred by sorcerous means or others."

On his words, the scaly beasts vanished, their great, crouching bodies once again nothing more than a snarl of silent, black-gleaming roots.

The chill air remained, but a soft rustling came from within the temple and Hardwick could almost imagine the Dark One nodding consent.

"As you will." His deep voice shook the trees and sent shock waves through the fog. "But know this, you who seek my benevolence. If you fail, the old condition will return at once, along with your curse to satisfy a different woman every night. This time you will no longer be able to roam the world and centuries at will, choosing your bedmates as it pleases you."

The Dark One paused and the icy air grew even colder. "One slip and you will find yourself in the blackest, most vile level of the world-between-the-worlds, where you'd be forever doomed to pleasure the pathetic creatures who dwell there. Females far different from the endless lovelies you've pleased down through the ages."

Hardwick narrowed his eyes on the temple, then carefully sheathed his sword. "I would ask one boon."

"Indeed?" The Dark One humphed. "Name it quickly – before I tire of speaking with you."

"I would have the right to choose where I spend the required proving period." Hardwick stood straighter, his jaw tight with determination. "That is all."

A place where he could live quietly and away from all temptation.

He left the words unspoken, his entire body taut with the waiting. "Well? Am I to have my boon?"

"It shall be granted." The Dark One appeared on the temple's threshold, an imposing masculine form, only discernible as a blackness deeper than the surrounding darkness. "Choose wisely – you will not be allowed a second chance."

Hardwick opened his mouth to reply, but a flash of eye-blinding lightning snatched the words. A simultaneous boom of thunder ripped away the trees and the temple, leaving him alone in

another, less threatening corner of this mystical realm he'd drifted in and out of for so long.

Great swaths of shimmering gray-white mist slid past him now, and he knew from experience he need only find the appropriate opening, then will himself below.

Far below, to wherever on the earth plane he wished.

But first he looked beneath his shield, his heart slamming against his ribs when he saw only his plaid and wide-leathered sword belt riding low on his hips.

His *problem* was gone.

Or, better said, relaxed.

Throwing back his head, he whooped. Then he grinned broadly and lowered his shield, removing it from in front of his groin for the first time in seven hundred years.

"By all the gods!" He dashed a hand across his cheek and heaved a great sigh.

His curse was finally over.

Now he need only seek his place of refuge.

Blessedly, he knew exactly where he needed to go.

Chapter One

Dunroamin Castle
A Registered Residential Retirement Home
Scotland's Far North, the Present

Someone was watching her.

Cilla Swanner dropped the pullover she'd been about to lift out of her suitcase and stood very still. Something had prickled her nape and it wasn't the overall gloom seeming to fill the shadowy, dark-paneled bedchamber. Nor was it the deep silence pressing in on her from all sides, even though it wasn't much later than three in the afternoon.

She turned to a particularly suspect corner, eyes narrowing. She would've sworn she'd caught movement there. Something – her imagination insisted - that would prove to be all claws and fetid breath.

Long, flashing teeth and fiery red eyes.

Fortunately, the scariest thing she detected was a faint waft of mildew.

She almost laughed. She was bigger than the smell of damp and old furniture. And as a modern, sensible soul, she'd simply ignore how much the lavishly furnished, gothic-style room reminded her of every Dracula movie she'd ever seen.

That would be her first line of defense against weirdness.

A tactic she'd likely need since the room would be hers for the summer.

Even so, she allowed herself a quick glance over her shoulder, half expecting the latched window shutters to slowly swing open, giving her a glimpse of the thick fog currently rolling across Dunroamin's lonely shore. Pea soup, she'd call such roiling, impenetrable fog, though the local term was *sea haar*. Either way, she just knew that if she did dare a look, more than swirling gray mist would greet her.

In her present jet-lagged state of mind, she'd likely see a seagull glide past and mistake it for a bat.

Reaching again for her pullover, she thought better of it and rolled her shoulders instead. She was not exactly a Lilliputian, and so cramming herself into an economy window seat from Newark to Glasgow had left her feeling stiff, achy, and more than a little cranky.

The endless drive north hadn't done much to de-frazzle her,

however breathtaking the scenery. Thank goodness she'd had competent escorts and hadn't had to brave the left-sided driving and spindle-thin roads herself. Equally good, she knew exactly how to banish her body aches and tiredness.

A long, hot shower was what she needed.

And no matter how Transylvania-like the high-ceilinged, wooden-floored room struck her, its spacious and airy bathroom looked totally twenty-first century.

Already feeling the restorative pounding of a good, steaming shower, she stripped with light-speed. But just as she reached to unhook her bra, she noticed the framed poster of her Aunt Birdie and Uncle Mac on Dunroamin's steps.

She had a copy of it in her apartment back in Yardley, Pennsylvania. Hers was mounted in a tartan frame and had pride of place above her living room sofa. This one hung near the shuttered windows, its Old World-looking frame as dark as the room's paneling.

But at least its familiarity took away some of the room's eeriness. Thankful for that, she tossed aside her bra and went to look at the poster.

It was a Christmas card photo she'd had blown up just last year, thinking that her aunt and uncle would appreciate the way a slanting ray of winter sun highlighted the stone armorial panel with the MacGhee coat-of-arms above their heads. Theirs, and the dark head of a tall, broad-shouldered man standing a few feet behind them, close to the castle's open door.

"Huh?" She blinked, certain she was now not just jet-lagged, but seeing things.

The man – who looked quite roguishly medieval – hadn't been in the poster before.

Nor was he there now, on second look.

He'd only been a shadow. A trick of light cast across the glass.

She shivered all the same. Rubbing her arms, she stepped closer to the poster. He'd looked so real. And if she was beginning to see imaginary men, handsome, kilted, or otherwise, she was in worse shape than any jet-lag she'd ever before experienced.

Certain that had to be it – the mind-fuzzing effects of crossing time zones and lack of sleep – she touched a finger to the poster glass, relieved to find it smooth and cool to the touch, absolutely normal-feeling, just as it should be.

But whether the man was gone or not, something was wrong. In just the few seconds she'd needed to cross the room, the air had grown all thick and heavy. Icy, too. As if someone had set an air conditioner to subzero, deliberately flash-freezing the bedchamber.

She frowned. Unless she was mistaken, Dunroamin didn't have

air conditioners.

It did, however, have strange shadows in posters.

No, not shadows.

The man was back, and this time he'd moved. Just as dark and medieval-looking as before, he now stood next to Aunt Birdie and Uncle Mac instead of behind them.

"Oh, God!" She jumped away from the poster and raised her arms across her naked breasts.

He cocked a brow at her – right through the poster glass!

Her heart began to gallop. She couldn't move. Her legs felt like rubber, and even screaming was pointless. Her throat had closed on her and her tongue felt stuck to the top of her mouth.

Disbelief and shock sweeping her, she looked on as the man, illusion, or whatever, sauntered away from her aunt and uncle to lean a shoulder against the door arch. Devilishly sexy – she couldn't help but notice - he just stood there, arms and ankles crossed as he stared back at her.

Once, he flicked a glance at something that looked like a round medieval shield propped against the wall near his feet. She thought he might reach for it, but he only looked up to glare at her.

"You aren't there." She found her voice, a pathetic croak. "I am not seeing you-"

She blinked.

Mr. Wasn't-Really-There was gone again.

Only the shadow on the glass remained.

"Oh, man." Her shower forgotten, she snatched up her bra and the rest of her airplane clothes, tossing them back on even faster than she'd taken them off. She should never have accepted Uncle Mac's welcome dram.

Not after being up nearly thirty hours.

"Miss Swanner?" A woman's voice called through the closed door, accompanied by a quick rap. "Are you awake?"

She almost flew across the room, half-tempted to answer that, yes, she was awake, but she was also having waking hallucinations.

Instead, she ran a hand through her hair and opened the door. "Yes?"

"I'm Honoria, Dunroamin's housekeeper. I've come to take you down to tea if you're feeling up to it?" An older woman in a heavy tweed suit and sturdy shoes peered at her, the oversized print of an unusually large badge pinned to her jacket, repeating her name.

Following her glance, the woman put back strong-looking shoulders and cleared her throat. "Some of our residents have difficulty remembering names. Others"- she looked both ways down the dimly lit corridor, tactfully lowering her voice – "don't see well."

Cilla almost choked. There wasn't anything wrong with her memory, but since a few moments ago, she had some serious doubts about her vision.

About everything.

The world she'd known and understood, tipped drastically when she'd peered at that poster.

Hoping the housekeeper wouldn't notice, she stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind her. "I'd love tea," she said, meaning it. "And I'm looking forward to meeting the residents. Aunt Birdie and Uncle Mac always talked so much about them, I feel as if I know them."

"Ach, you won't be seeing any of them just yet." The housekeeper glanced at her as they moved down the plaid-carpeted corridor. "They'll be having their tea in the library. Your aunt and uncle are waiting for you in the armory."

Cilla blinked, wondering if her hearing was going wacky as well. "The armory?"

Honoria paused at the top of a great oak staircase. "It's not what it sounds like, though there are still enough weapons on the walls. Your uncle uses the room as his private study. His den, I believe you Americans call it?"

"Oh." She felt foolish for thinking she was going somewhere that would give her the willies.

A den she could handle, even if it did have a few swords and shields decorating the walls.

But when Honoria opened the door, ushering her inside, she found the armory unlike any American-style den she'd ever seen. Full of quiet and shadows, medieval weapons gleamed on every inch of wall space, and two full-sized suits of standing armor flanked a row of tall windows across from the door.

Cilla froze just inside the threshold, the willies making her stomach clench.

Her aunt and uncle were nowhere to be seen.

Her heart thumping again, she turned to the door. "Are you sure this is where Aunt Birdie and-" She closed her mouth, catching a glimpse of the housekeeper already rounding a curve at the far end of the corridor.

"Ach! There you are." Her uncle's deep voice sounded from the room's shadows. "Come away in, lass, and have your tea with us."

Spinning around, she saw her aunt and uncle at last. They sat in the soft lamplight of a corner table set for tea. Aunt Birdie, with her sleek, tawny-colored hair and large, deep blue eyes, looking so much like an older version of Cilla's mother and herself, she started.

Uncle Mac, kilted as always, wore the bold, masculine room

like a second skin.

With his larger-than-life good looks and full, curling red beard, not to mention his horn-handled *sgian-dubh*, the ever-present dagger peeking up from his sock, he looked every bit the fierce Highland chieftain.

So much so, Cilla forgot herself and blurted what she really wanted to know. "Uncle Mac – does your castle have ghosts?"

"Ho! Not here an hour and already you're asking what every American visitor wants to know." Slapping his hands on his thighs, he pushed to his feet, his face splitting in a broad, twinkly-eyed grin. "The only ghosts hereabouts are my ancient creaky knees. If you count both together, they're well o'er a hundred! So dinnae you go all polite on me and say you haven't heard 'em cracking."

Cilla smiled. "If your knees are creaky, I would've noticed when you picked me up in Lairg and helped Malcolm load my luggage from his car to yours." She crossed the room and hugged him. "I must say, I didn't hear a thing."

"Didn't you now?" He lifted a bushy brow. "There's some who might say that's only because young Malcolm was blethering away like a headless chicken. As he surely told you, he works at Ravenscraig Castle down Oban way."

He paused to scratch his beard. "Now that's a place with a ghostie or two. Not my Dunroamin. I took my first breath in these walls. If there were any bogles flitting about, sure enough and I'd know it."

Aunt Birdie sniffed. "What about the gray lady on the main stairs?" She came forward to join them, her purple-and-blue watered silk dress swirling around her like an exotic, perfume-scented cloud. "Or the little boy who sits on a stool in a corner of the kitchen?"

Her husband hooted. "The day a misty lady floats down my stairs, I'll shave off my beard." He whipped out his *sgian-dubh*, looking down as he tested its edge. A satisfied smile lit his face when a bead of red appeared on his thumb. "Och, aye, I'm all for taking off my beard when the like happens. And" – he leaned close, his tone conspiratorial – "the offer stands for any other spook, gray, green, or even pink, who might care to put in an appearance."

"Have a care, dear. There's always a kernel of truth to any legend." Aunt Birdie tapped his chest with a red-tipped fingernail. "Bucks County back home is steeped in both tradition and ghosts. Here …." she let her voice trail off. "Let's just say that you, as a Highlander, should know better than to scoff at such things."

He huffed and waved a hand.

"Tell me" – he winked at Cilla – "do you believe in such foolery? Ghosts, tall tales, and plaid-draped, sword-packing beasties

that go bump in the night?"

"I-"

Cilla bit her lip.

From what she'd seen of Scotland so far, she doubted Uncle Mac would like her answer.

Dunroamin made it even easier to believe in such things.

The very blend of peat smoke, old leather, and furniture oil pervading each antique-crammed room hinted at possibility of another time.

Likewise the grand gilt-framed ancestral portraits lining all the dark and must-tinged corridors.

A chill slid down Cilla's spine.

She wasn't at all keen on walking past some of those portraits at late at night when the house was quiet. More than one of the fierce-eyed, bekilted Highlanders depicted so boldly looked more than able to belt out an ancient war cry and leap down from his golden-scrolled frame, sword swinging and murder on his mind.

"If not ghosties" - Uncle Mac's voice cut the stillness – "what say you to Selkie folk or dear old Nessie?" He hitched up his kilt belt, his curly beard jigging with the movement. "Nessie's big business for some of those high-dollar tour operators down in Inverness."

Cilla hesitated, hardly hearing his teasing.

Her gaze kept going to one of the standing suits of armor across the room. Try as she might, she couldn't shake the impression someone stared at her from behind the narrow eye slit of the knight's silvery helm.

And the stare wasn't friendly.

She shivered, once again feeling all goosebumpy.

"Well?" Uncle Mac slung an arm around her shoulders. "Restore my faith in Americans. Tell me you know that footsteps on the stairs at night are nothing more than popping water pipes."

"Of course, I know that." She spoke quickly, before she could change her mind. "I've never believed in ghosts."

She didn't add that she might soon be persuaded to think otherwise.

If she saw *him* again.

Mr. Wasn't-Really-There peeking out at her from behind poster glass.

"No, I do not believe in them," she repeated, speaking firmly and confidently.

Just in case *he* was listening.

"Good, good." Her uncle flashed a triumphant smile. "Maybe you can talk some sense into your aunt over tea. I haven't had any luck in all these years. Woman has a mind of her own."

"You won't be joining us?" Cilla looked at him, disappointed.

Uncle Mac shook his head. "Ach, lass, would that I could, but duty calls…."

Glancing at his watch, anticipation lit his face. Raising his arms high above his head, he twirled in a fast tricky-footed spin in the same instant a blast of lively pipe music skirled through the armory.

"Gah!" Cilla nearly jumped out of her skin.

"The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards!" Uncle Mac ended his jig with a quick little hop and flourish. "'Paddy's Leather Breeches,' that is," he boomed, looking pleased. "One o' my favorite pipe tunes."

"It's also his cue that it's time for him to attend our residents in the library." Aunt Birdie looked up from pouring tea. "He sometimes takes naps in here," she explained, indicating a comfortable-looking tartan sofa half-hidden in the shadows near the hearth. "The pipe tune ensures he doesn't sleep through teatime. It's an afternoon ritual."

"I ne'er sleep, you!" He wriggled his brows at her. "I dose."

Cilla hid a smile. "So what's the ritual? The pipes or tea?"

"Both!" Uncle Mac's chest swelled. "If you didn't know, in addition to pipes, there are three things Highlanders love: their home glen, a good fight, and a stirring fireside tale. Since most of our residents are far from their glens and all of them are too old to fight, they enjoy a well-told tale."

He paused, his eyes sparkling with good humor. "I try to give them one, at teatime."

Laughing, he made another spirited spin – this time without the blare of "Paddy's Leather Breeches" - and then disappeared into the corridor, leaving Cilla alone with her aunt.

Her beloved Aunt Birdie, and a fusty, weapon-hung room that went even more dark and eerie without Uncle Mac and his jolly bluster.

Cilla rubbed her arms, feeling cold again.

"Come, dear. We should have warned you about your uncle's pipe alarm, but we can have a few quiet words now." Aunt Birdie waved a hand at the table. Covered with starchy-looking white linen, it glimmered with crystal and silver and held more delicacies than most people could eat in a week.

"You must be starving." Her aunt pulled out a chair for her, then took the one opposite for herself. "Dunroamin's scones will melt in your mouth. Or if you wish something more substantial, I can offer you oatcakes with hot smoked salmon and cheese."

"I'm not really that hungry." Cilla joined her, but her attention strayed to the row of windows and the thick sea haar pressing against the leaded, diamond-shaped panes.

She could almost imagine a hooded form peering in at her

through the mullioned glass, but she cast aside the notion at once.

Whoever – or whatever – seemed to be watching her felt rampantly male and daring.

If it was a ghost, it wasn't the kind to drift about in the mist, shrouded and faceless.

Her ghost would snatch a sword off the armory wall, grab one of the shields hanging everywhere, and then charge out of the castle, looking for action.

He'd also have the same sexy, dark looks of the man in the poster. Just minus his rude glare.

"At least eat something." Aunt Birdie was looking at her strangely. "Cook will be offended if she happens past here and pops in to see you staring at the targes rather than enjoying her famous scones."

"Targes?" Cilla blinked. She wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. Even after several minutes the rousing pipe tune still rang in her ears.

"The shields." Aunt Birdie leaned over to set a scone on her plate. "The round, leather-covered ones decorated with Celtic interlacing and brass studs."

"Are they medieval?" Cilla ignored the scone, eyeing instead a wicked-looking targe that had a pointed spike sticking out from its center. "They look pretty scary."

Her aunt lifted a brow. "More than the swords?"

"The one over the fireplace looks like it could do as much damage as a sword."

"Likely it has." Aunt Birdie helped herself to a dainty portion of hot smoked salmon. "The targes in here are said to be of the Culloden era. Your uncle even thinks one or two might have been blooded in that sad disaster."

She set down her fork. "Don't mention Culloden to your uncle. Not if you don't want an earful. He visits the site whenever we drive down to Inverness and considers himself quite an authority on the battle."

"It was the last battle on British soil, right?" Cilla slid another glance at the shields. "Bonnie Prince Charlie, the clans, and all that?"

"That's right." Aunt Birdie nodded. "Culloden broke the clans and proved the death knell of clan culture. The battle and its aftermath also smoothed the way for the Highland Clearances that followed. Strathnaver suffered bitterly in those times, with whole communities being put to flight, their homes torched to make way for more profitable sheep." She leaned close, lowering her voice. "People hereabouts still speak as if it all happened just yesterday."

"And Uncle Mac leads the parade." The notion made Cilla

smile.

"He does." Aunt Birdie smiled, too. "He's a real crusader for the old ways. His interest in the times is one reason he's collected the targes. That's why I don't think any of them are medieval, though I suppose they could be. They certainly were around back then."

"I thought so." Cilla picked at her scone. She wasn't about to admit that the real reason the shields bothered her was because there'd been one in the poster with Mr. Wasn't-Really-There. The targe had been propped against the wall, near his feet.

And like him, it hadn't belonged there.

Which meant she was losing her mind.

Or seeing ghosts.

Needing to know which it was, she pushed back from the table and stood. "Aunt Birdie, is Uncle Mac really so sure there aren't any ghosts here?"

"Why?" Her aunt put down her salmon-topped oatcake. "Have you seen one? There are stories, you know. All these gloomy old piles have their tales."

"I know," Cilla agreed. She also knew her aunt surely believed every one she heard.

Aunt Birdie was like that.

"Out with the fairies," her mother always called her. Hearing the laughter of sprites in the tinkle of a stream or seeing *shades* in thin veils of drifting mist.

Cilla tossed back her hair and lifted her chin.

She was different.

"But what does Uncle Mac really think?" She paced a bit, her gaze repeatedly sliding to the windows. "Mom and Dad mentioned there were some problems here. Do they have anything to do with ghosts?"

"So some say. But not your uncle." Aunt Birdie dabbed a linen napkin at her mouth. "He'd laugh in the face of the devil. In fact, he thinks it's a devil causing our difficulties."

She set down the napkin and lowered her voice. "A mortal, flesh-and-blood devil out to ruin us, though we can't imagine who he is or what he has against Dunroamin."

"Oh, dear. That sounds serious." Cilla returned to the table, roguish-looking poster shadows forgotten. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"We'll discuss it later. We need to, as we're hoping you can help us with a few things. Just now, I'd much rather hear about you." Aunt Birdie patted her hand. "We were so sorry to hear about Grant."

Cilla nearly choked on her tea. "Don't be. Getting dumped by

Grant A. Hughes III was the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm totally over him."

Aunt Birdie's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure? You don't sound-"

"If I sound upset, it's not because of losing Grant. It's because his new girlfriend had a hand in ruining my business." She set down her teacup. "I can't prove it, but I'm certain she torpedoed Vintage Chic."

"But you were doing so well." Aunt Birdie looked astonished.

"So well I had to sell my car to pay several months overdue rent." Heat began inching up her throat and she slipped a finger beneath the neck opening of her top, feeling warm in the chilly room.

"You should have told us."

"I couldn't." She looked across the table at her aunt, something about her – as always – making the words spill. "Call it pride as far as you and Uncle Mac go and, well, regarding Mom and Dad, they don't have enough as is. No way did I want them dipping into their savings to help me."

Aunt Birdie shook her head. "I'm so sorry, dear. We had no idea." She gestured with her scone at the laptop Uncle Mac had left sitting at the far end of the table. "I remember you emailing some while back about a local jewelry and gift shop giving you display space. You said they were very excited about your sales, that-"

"You mean the Charm Box at the Emporium, a cluster of secondhand, antique, and jewelry shops in the heart of Yardley. They cater to shoppers with eclectic tastes." Cilla tried not to sound bitter. "Paterson's Charm Box is the one who carried my broken china jewelry creations. And, yes, they were enthusiastic. Unfortunately, their daughter, Dawn, saw things differently."

"She's the one seeing Grant?"

Cilla nodded. "The last time I took in a new batch of designs, she told me my work wasn't selling and they couldn't waste the counter space on me. Even worse, I'd swear she and her family are friendly with every other antique and jewelry shop owner between Philly and Trenton. After the Patersons ousted me, no other shops would even look at my work."

"Sounds like sour grapes." Aunt Birdie stood and crossed the room to toss a few peat bricks on the fire. "Sorry, of a sudden, I'm freezing." She gave Cilla an apologetic smile as she reclaimed her seat at the table. "So tell me. Who is this girl?"

"She's a force to be reckoned with, that's what." Cilla poked at her scone. It wasn't very encouraging to realize that the thought of her miniscule rival still had such power to needle her. "Born to rich and doting parents, she's pampered, spoiled, and always gets her way.

Or in Grant's case, her man."

Aunt Birdie reached across the table to top up her tea. "I think Grant is the loser, dear."

Cilla shrugged. "Rumor is she told him she's preggers. Either way, she's so tiny she barely reaches my shoulders, but she packs a mean punch. I have it on good authority that she even blackballed me with the people who run the Red Barn, a local flea market. Who knows if she did or not, but when I tried to rent space there, I was declined. Thing is" - she stirred a dollop of milk into her tea – "they had at least a half dozen booths free, and still do."

Aunt Birdie's eyes widened. "Grant fell for such a woman?"

"So it would seem. Either Dawn Paterson or the wealth behind her."

"But he has money of his own." Aunt Birdie frowned. "Isn't his family one of the richest on the Delaware?"

"The richest, I suspect." Cilla splayed the fingers of her left hand, her ring finger now naked of the egg-sized diamond she'd sported until so recently. "I imagine their position had something to do with turning his head in Dawn's direction. Status mattered to Grant."

Fool.

The deep Scottish voice came from somewhere near the row of tall windows. Loud and resonating, the single word echoed off the walls and strummed the air.

Cilla jerked. Something like a jolt of electricity tripped through her, spilling from the roots of her hair clear down to the tips of her toes.

"Did you hear that?" She flashed a look at her aunt, her pulse quickening. "A man's voice-"

"Shush…" Aunt Birdie put a finger to her lips.

"I heard him clearly," Cilla insisted anyway. "Maybe Uncle Mac is in the corridor? Or it was another of his recordings?"

She twisted around, her gaze searching the room.

But it was empty.

No suspicious humming gave away a recorded jest.

And the dark square of the door showed only shadows. Nothing but the ever-present sea haar stared in at them from the long bank of glittering, Jacobean-era windows.

Fool. The word still filled her ears.

Aunt Birdie sat quietly sipping her tea, a faraway look in her deep blue eyes.

"There is someone here." She turned to Cilla, her gaze once more clear. "A chivalrous man who cannot stand seeing women treated poorly. I feel he'd avenge you if he could."

Cilla swallowed. "You sense him?"

"Oh, yes." Her aunt tilted her head, listening. "I'd bet your uncle's beard on it."

"And he wants to avenge me?"

Cilla kept her doubt to herself. She didn't believe in gallant men, ghostly or otherwise.

Her aunt flicked a crumb off the tablecloth.

"I can only tell you the impressions I'm getting." She met Cilla's eyes, her own gaze steady. "It's mostly anger and I'm interpreting his energy as being colored by Grant's betrayal, though I could be wrong. But, come" – she jumped up and pulled Cilla to her feet – "let's join your uncle in the library. As he would say, I likely shouldn't have indulged in a second dram when you arrived."

Moving quickly, she tugged Cilla from the room. "Tomorrow will be soon enough to think about our troubles here at Dunroamin, and whatever heartache Grant A. Hughes III has caused you."

Grant A. Hughes III.

The third, by love of all the ancients. Near the windows, Hardwick stifled a snort. The man wasn't just a fool. He had a name like a pompous, limp-wristed peacock.

Certain he had other, equally disagreeable faults, Hardwick stepped out of his hiding place the instant the two women exited the room.

Brushing at his plaid, he frowned at the now-empty suit of armor. Never again would he materialize inside anything even halfway as constricting.

He shuddered and flexed his fingers. For good measure, he wriggled his toes, as well. A few vigorous neck rolls, first in one direction and then the other, followed by a quick set of knee bends, completed his attempts to rid himself of the kinks and knots plaguing him.

All that, and still he felt miserable.

Whoever had once worn the armor had been a small, slightly built man.

Definitely not a Highlander.

Proud to belong to that noble race himself, he should have been more wary when he'd followed the interloper from her bedchamber. His scowl deepening, he planted fisted hands on his hips and glanced around.

How typical that he'd purposely left his own shield outside, only to have the fetching creature he now knew to be Cilla Swanner not only flash her breasts at him, but to leave him no choice than to trail after her to the castle armory.

A room filled with shields – taunting reminders of the state in which he'd passed the last seven hundred years.

The dire circumstances he'd find himself in if he failed to meet the Dark One's requirements for lifting the wizard-bard's curse.

"A plague on it," he growled, scowling. "And on that long-ago lute picker. May his fingers rot and wither, or stick to his lute strings." He put back his shoulders, his own curse rolling off his tongue with enough heat to rival any fireballs the Dark One might throw at him for his insolence.

There were some things a man just shouldn't have to endure.

Dwelling beneath the same roof as his one great weakness – a damsel in distress - topped his list.

A room hung with targes proved a close second.

Glaring at them, he considered using his ghostly abilities to get rid of them. Perhaps send them hurtling into the North Sea, letting them sink into its briny depths, one shield at a time.

Or simply flicking his fingers and making them vanish. All at once, and with a fine and satisfying burst of colorful sparks.

Unfortunately, his honor wouldn't allow him such mischievous pleasures.

Mac MacGhee was a goodly sort, and in the short time he'd enjoyed the laird's unwitting hospitality, he'd grown rather fond of the man.

He also knew Mac appreciated the targes.

Still earthbound and curse-free, MacGhee hadn't spent an eternity holding one of the fool contraptions in front of his tender parts.

He just wished the man had mentioned the pending arrival of his niece.

His Ameri-cain niece.

He shuddered, his every shred of self-preservation clamping around him. Cilla Swanner posed a greater threat than an entire hall strung with shields.

From experience, he knew how dangerous such foreign wenches could be. Two of his closest friends had fallen for females of her ilk, even succumbing deep enough to marry them.

Blowing out a hot breath, he shoved a hand through his hair, his friends' capitulations riding him hard.

He couldn't risk any such foolery.

It'd been bad enough looking on as the maid had bared her breasts.

And what magnificent breasts! Full, well-rounded, and pink-tipped, they'd bounced as she'd crossed the room to peer at him. Seldom had he seen such creamy, succulent teats. She'd stood so close

to the poster frame that he could almost feel their silky-smooth weight in his hands.

Almost taste her chill-tightened nipples beneath his greedy, swirling tongue.

Gods, how he'd love to suckle them!

At once, he felt a stir beneath his kilt. A sudden rush of heat and twitches that heralded the start of a man's oh-so-irresistible swelling.

"Damnation," he snarled, clenching his fists until the hot pulling receded.

Furious, he stared up at the room's hammer-beam ceiling. He should have vanished when the lass had stripped down to such a delectable state of undress.

Most certainly when she'd headed toward him, her startled expression leaving no doubt that she'd seen him.

But nae….

He'd ignored all good sense to stare right back at her like a lovestruck gawp, his old instincts rooting him in place despite the perils.

He frowned again.

The curvaceous lass was a threat he hadn't expected to encounter at a remote Highland home for the aged.

He'd hoped to spend his days being bored and uninspired.

Wholly free of temptation.

Setting his jaw, he tossed another glare at the wall of shields. Then he curled his fingers around his sword belt, preparing to transport himself up onto the battlements.

For reasons he didn't care to acknowledge, he felt a strong need for a blast of chill, bracing air.

Something told him he soon might even require a few dips in the icy sea.

Hardwick sighed. He'd chosen the refuge for his proving period unwisely.

Most unwisely indeed.

Chapter Two

"Fool."

The word followed Hardwick to the battlements, sticking as close to him as the blaring strains of Mac MacGhee's favorite pipe tune still rattled in his ears. He cupped them with the palms of his hands and pressed hard, trying in vain to rid himself of the loud, droning echo.

Not that he didn't love pipes.

He did, as did all self-respecting Highlanders.

But there were bagpipes and then *bagpipes*.

Mac MacGhee's mechanically contrived blast of Heiland skirling was an abomination.

Hardwick frowned. Never again would he make the mistake of manifesting in the laird's privy quarters just prior to teatime.

Nor would he allow himself any further moments of self-satisfaction over having chosen Dunroamin as the place of refuge for his proving period.

His decision was disastrous.

If Grant A Hughes III was a fool for walking away from the lightsome lass, he was an even greater lackwit for putting himself in her path.

"A double-dyed *doomed* lackwit," he fumed, glaring at the mist drifting past the battlements. Thick and gray, great sheets of it swirled everywhere. He narrowed his eyes, peering at each billowy drift. It would be just like the Dark One to lurk behind the impenetrable brew, gloating at him.

Twice now he'd caught what could've been a crone's cackling laugh.

Or – the gods forbid – the heinous sniggers of a whole gaggle of them.

He shuddered, looking deeper into the fog.

But his best peering efforts turned up naught. If the fiend or his hell hags were at Dunroamin, they were keeping themselves well hidden. So he put them from his mind and bowed to long habit, conjuring his shield.

A flick of his fingers and it appeared in his hand.

The shield's familiarity comforted.

He just hoped he'd never again need it for its erstwhile purpose.

Certain such a calamity was rushing right at him, he balled his fists and began to pace the wall-walk. A cold drizzle slicked the stone flagging and darkened the castle walls, but the rain-misted afternoon

suited him.

So much so that he didn't bother to draw his plaid against the rising wind.

There was, after all, no need.

Mac MacGhee's bonnie niece more than warmed him.

With every angry footfall, her face rose before him. She tempted and vexed him with her startled eyes of deepest blue, the fine line of her jaw, and her creamy skin. The sleek fall of her thick, silky hair also taunted him. Honey-gold in color and just brushing her shoulders, the gleaming strands begged a man's touch. Just as her mouth, so full, sweetly-curved, and soft-looking, hinted at a hidden lustiness he'd love to waken in her.

A groan rose deep in his throat and he pulled a hand down over his chin.

He hadn't often loved a fair-haired woman. Well-prized in his day, most proved either already taken or were sequestered away in an unassailable tower, guarded by their fathers until the highest bidder claimed them.

How he'd love to claim this one!

He swallowed another groan, imagining the bliss of thrusting his hands into such shining skeins. He'd twine the strands around his fingers and pull her close, kissing her deeply. If she kissed him back, he'd crush her to him, making sure she felt the thick, hard length of him brushing against her.

Just thinking about such deliciousness let him almost feel her softness pressing into him, the golden strands of her hair spilling through his fingers, delighting and bewitching him. He drew a deep breath and released it slowly.

Fair women were a prize beyond telling.

In his numberless years of carousing, most of his bedmates had sported tresses of flame or coloring as dark as his own. Of the few yellow-maned wenches he'd sampled, he'd quickly known they'd gleaned the bright shade from the local henwife.

Their *other* hair gave away the secret every time.

But he knew what the tongue-waggers said about true flaxen-haired, blue-eyed maidens.

Once a man melted them, their fire burned hotter than the sun.

Need clawed at his gut. He drew a tight breath, wishing he'd never heard such blether. He wasn't the man to test Cilla Swanner's passion.

Would that he could.

In another time and place it would've been possible.

As things were, he simply strode faster, letting his quickened pace and his fury heat his blood. His frustration also staved off the

bite of the day's cold, wet wind.

Until the gusts turned, sending up spray from the foot of the cliffs to flip an edge his plaid across his eyes.

"Damnation!" He snatched at the offending wool, yanking it down, only to discover that the maid's face still hovered before him.

Worse, he could now see even more of her.

In memory, her naked breasts bobbed right beneath his nose. Just as full, round, and plump as he remembered, and with the rosy-sweet crests drawn deliciously tight.

"By all the powers!" He roared the curse.

Snapping his brows together, he glared at the image until the wind broke it apart.

When, after a moment, only mist and drizzle drifted across the parapets, he released the breath he'd been holding and shoved back his hair. He didn't know how she'd done it – a long line and more centuries of women than he liked to admit had only left him disinterested, even after a particularly pleasing tumble – yet this one had somehow managed to brand herself on him.

And he hadn't even kissed her.

That could only mean trouble.

Feeling it settle around him like a dark, clinging cloud, he set his jaw and started pacing again.

If need be, he'd spend his proving time doing so.

Pacing was good.

Scowling, likewise.

Better yet, even on a fine weather day, the battlements often stayed windswept and cold. Many a good, stout Scots lass wouldn't care to brave such a chill and blustery aerie.

With luck, an outlander wouldn't even attempt the climb up the narrow, winding stair.

Unfortunately, something told him Cilla Swanner might. After all, she'd crossed the room to peer at him inside the poster frame even if seeing him there clearly didn't sit well with her.

She might look as if she should be perched in a tower window, her fair hair spilling over the ledge as she pined for some noble gallant to come and carry her away on a white steed, but she had a bold and daring heart.

He was sure of it.

So he stomped on, practicing his best glares the while.

"Ho! Here is a wonder!" A deep voice boomed behind him. "Ne'er would I have believed I'd see the day you scowl and curse o'er such a comely lass."

Hardwick whipped around so fast he nearly dropped his shield.

Bran MacNeil of Barra stood a few paces away, his huge bearlike form almost splitting with mirth. Ghostly, great-hearted, and good-humored, the Hebridean chieftain sported a bushy beard nearly as red as Mac MacGhee's and his blue eyes crinkled with the same teasing amusement.

The gemstone in the pommel of his sword hilt shone dimly in the day's pale light and his plaid lifted in the wind, its woolen folds smelling distinctly of a heady musk-scented perfume that wasn't Bran's own.

"You great stirk!" Hardwick glowered at him. "Cease goggling at me like a ring-tailed gowk. You should know why I'm scowling."

"I can think it, aye!"

"No doubt," Hardwick agreed. "You know fine why I'm here."

He tightened his grip on his shield. A sharp bite to his tongue kept him from demanding how his longtime friend and wenching companion knew Cilla Swanner was comely.

Or, more importantly, how he knew she even existed.

"Why are you here?" Hardwick eyed him, curious. Though, in truth, he'd already guessed the answer. "You rarely leave Barra."

His friend cut the air with a hand. "My fair isle will keep until my return. I came to see how you're doing here in the wild and lonely north!"

"I've been passing my nights well enough until-" Hardwick caught himself.

Somewhere in the mist behind him, a wicked chortle sounded.

Hardwick's nape prickled. His blood chilled and he blanked his features, as if he'd not noticed.

Bran just kept laughing. "Until you had your head turned, what?"

"My head hasn't been turned." Hardwick lifted his voice, hoping any lurking cacklers would hear his denial and return to their hell hole. "You're poking your nose where it doesn't belong and seeing things that aren't there."

"Say you?"

"I do."

Looking as if he knew everything, the burly Islesman leaned back against the parapet's notched wall and crossed his ankles.

"I told you it would have been wiser to hie yourself to Barra," he said, sounding most serious. "There, you could have-"

Hardwick laughed.

He couldn't help himself.

Then he shoved a hand through his hair and spoke the truth. "Your hall is so thick with temptation you could stir the place with a spoon."

"Aye, so it is!" Bran looked more than pleased with the description. "But" – he raised a sage finger – "you have sampled the charms of all the lovelies who drop in and out of my keep. It seems to me, you'd have had less trouble turning a blind eye to them than to *this* maid."

Hardwick humphed.

Much as he loved his friend, he wouldn't give him the satisfaction of an answer.

Besides, the lout's piercing stare showed that he already knew.

"She's an Ameri-*cain*." Bran spoke the word as if it were dipped in gold. He also pronounced it as one of their two foreign-bride-wedding friends had done. "Both Alex and Aidan fared well with such lassies," he observed, making it worse. "Perhaps you-"

"Their fates were cut of a different cloth!" Hardwick glared at him. "I do not even want to see a fetching piece of womanhood. No' now!

"So she is an Ameri-*cain*." He glared at his friend. "I dinnae care if she comes from the moon."

His temper rising, he strode to another section of the wall, deliberately choosing a place at least four square-toothed notches away from the Islesman.

"My wenching days are behind me." He cleared his throat. "I cannae return to them – even if I wished to do so."

"I wasnae speaking of wenching." Bran slapped his thigh. "Come you, dinnae be so thrawn. Stubbornness is for soured old men!"

Hardwick slid him an annoyed look. "And you say we are no' old?"

Bran gave a great belly-shaking laugh. "Centuries old isnae what I meant and well you know it! We are as hardy as the rutting stags on the hill."

"Speak for yourself. I am done with that kind of hardiness."

"Even so…." Bran stopped laughing. "There are just times I get these feelings, and this is one o' them. Think you I would leave my cozy hearth fire and a plump bed-warmer for naught? I say you, that lassie-"

"Is none of my concern." Hardwick blocked his ears to whatever else his friend had to say about her.

Scowling, he braced his hands on the cold stone of the merlon and stared down at the shimmering expanse of the Kyle of Tongue far below. Even on such a chill, mist-plagued afternoon, the strait's tossing surface glimmered and shone with silvery-blue light, and its wide sandy banks glistened in every shade of gold.

Soft, gleaming tones that made him think of the Ameri-*cain's*

hair.

He flinched.

The neck opening of his tunic had gone unpleasantly tight, but he refused to slip a finger beneath it. He did press his hands even harder against the damp grit of the merlon, his gaze on the swirl of the Kyle's fast-moving current.

Such a day of strong-running seas and wind should have invigorated him.

Instead, he found his heart freezing in his chest and his gut twisting. Of his usual sharp wit and high spirits, nary a jot remained. His mood had gone more foul than he could ever remember.

Even as a ghost – and cursed as he was - he'd never passed a day without laughing.

Now…

He skulked about, trying to ignore the presence of the one lass who might have really appealed to him. Equally galling, he'd been reduced to an over-the-shoulder-glancing fool, hearing cackles in every ripple of the wind.

He frowned.

His jaw set so tight he wondered he didn't crack a tooth.

"I've done a lot of thinking about Ameri-*cains*." Bran appeared at his elbow. "The women, I mean. There's something about them." He paused, drawing a deep breath, as if readying himself to pronounce some great gem of wisdom. "Ach, see you, after much consideration, I'm after thinking that when they come here-"

"They should turn around and take themselves right back where they came from." Hardwick flashed a dark look at his friend. "Leastways those so brazen they'd jiggle their bared breasts under a man's nose."

"So-o-o!" Bran hopped onto a merlon with surprising ease for a man of his size. "That is the way of it. She's for seducing you."

He pulled on his beard, an expression of feigned puzzlement on his face. "How odd that when I saw her heading this way, she looked more upset than out to flaunt her charms."

Hardwick's entire body tensed. "What do you mean she's coming this way?"

"Just that." Bran sounded convinced. "I'd gone looking for you and nearly collided with her in one of the corridors. Poor lassie would've dashed right through me if I hadn't leapt aside fast enough. She was making for the parapet stair."

"Then you must be mistaken." Hardwick's relief knew no bounds. "She left the armory in her aunt's company. They were on their way to the library. She wouldn't be careening through the passageways."

Bran shrugged. “Be that as it may, that’s where I saw her.”

“You saw someone else.” Hardwick willed it so. “Honoria perhaps. She’s the housekeeper and by far the youngest female here excepting-”

“Ach, but you insult me!” Bran clapped a hand to his chest. “Think you a man of my wenching experience cannae tell a housekeeper from an Ameri-*cain*?”

Hardwick frowned at the truth of his friend’s words.

He scowled even more when the lout vanished, leaving his merlon perch empty and Hardwick alone on the wall-walk, just when the parapet door flew open and *she* burst out onto the battlements.

Not Honoria at all, but his nemesis.

And looking so delectable he was tempted to close the short space between them with two swift strides and seize her to him, clamping her face between his hands and then kissing her long, hard, and deep. He’d ravish her until nothing mattered but the feel of her soft, red lips yielding to his own.

He wanted, needed, the bliss of her silken tongue twirling and sliding against his in hot, ancient rhythm.

The Dark One and his bargain be damned.

Instead, he simply stared at her, his frown so black he could feel it to his toes.

She stood perfectly still, poised just outside the door. Her cheeks were flushed pink and her hair tousled. Looking at her, Hardwick felt a fierce need to make her melt for him. Instead, he frowned and jerked his shield into place. Not to hide a rise in his plaid, but to disguise his attempt to prevent one.

Furious at the need, he slid a hand behind the targe and squeezed.

Hard.

Hard, long, and tight enough to bring tears to a lesser man, but he only gritted his teeth and winced. Once, in another life, he’d have thrown back his head and laughed at his word choices.

Now they only fueled his frustration.

Long and hard was definitely what he’d love to give her. And, mercy on him, he knew she’d be wonderfully tight.

Hot, sleek, and slippery wet.

Need speared him again, a sharp and painful hunger pulsing somewhere deep inside him.

She hadn’t yet noticed him, so he continued to stare at her, her appearance shattering his last hope that Bran might have erred. Worse, driving home how urgently he needed to rid himself of her.

Her scent alone damned him. Light, clean, and fresh as a spring breeze, it swirled around him, firing his blood and threatening

to set him like granite if he didn't have such firm grip on himself.

As it was, every other inch of him went rigid with desire. His senses snapped to dangerous alert and he squeezed himself even harder, struggling against her effect on him yet unable to look away.

Something had clearly upset her and – the gods help him – that air of flushed, wild-eyed vulnerability drew him as strongly as her lush curves and creamy smooth skin. Her breasts, covered now in a silky-looking top of softest blue, rose and fell in agitation, and her bright golden hair whipped crazily in the gusting wind.

She would be the end of him.

He knew it in his bones.

Cilla started forward, swiping at the tossing strands as she made straight for the battlement wall. Notched medieval-looking stonework that surely *was* medieval.

Just as she was certain that the great bearded Highlander who'd suddenly appeared in front of her in one of the portrait-hung passages had been, well, medieval.

If not that, he definitely wasn't of this time.

Nor of this world.

In fact, he'd looked downright savage. In a magnificent, old-time Highland-y sort of way.

Splendiferous or not, she wanted nothing to do with him. Shivering, she pulled her sweater tighter against the cold air and forced her legs to carry her across the narrow stone-flagged walkway.

No easy task when they felt like rubber and her knees wouldn't stop knocking. But she kept on, placing one foot in front of the other until she reached the wall.

She needed air.

Lots and lots of cold, fresh air.

"I did not just see another ghost. I did not almost run through him." She gripped the edge of a merlon, needing the stone's solidity. "He did not leap out of the way when-"

"Ahhh, but he did now, didn't he?" A deep voice, well-burred and buttery-rich, purred out of nowhere. "Perhaps you should leave before you run into someone who won't."

"Won't what?" She spoke before remembering no one was there.

"Won't leap out of your way, of course," the blowing mist returned.

Cilla's eyes flew wide.

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

Pea soup didn't talk!

Not in Yardley, Pennsylvania, and, she was sure, not in

Scotland, either.

Not even in the remote vastness of Sutherland.

Unwilling to consider the alternative, she straightened her shoulders and – very slowly – pushed away from the wall. Three, four long-legged strides would take her safely back to the doorway and she could just pop through it, leaving Dunroamin's all-too-eerie battlements behind her.

She wasn't in the mood to deal with talking mist.

But before she could turn around, she backed into something cold, hard, and unyielding.

Something round, leather-covered, and riddled with *bumps*. She could feel them pressing into the small of her back. She knew what they were.

The brass studs of a targe.

A medieval shield.

"Oh, no!" She spun on her heels, certain the poster ghost had come for her at last, but the man staring so fiercely at her was anything but a phantom.

Tall, dark, and kilted, he *was* clutching a shield.

He was also gorgeous, defined sensuality in a wicked, smoldering kind of way, and he had a decidedly roguish air about him. But he looked just as real and solid as anyone else. She swallowed as she blinked up at him. He did resemble Mr. Wasn't-Really-There, but she doubted a ghost could make her mouth go dry.

Or set her pulse to racing with his delicious masculinity. She could only stare at him, his proximity and the look in his peaty brown eyes sending awareness all through her. She even felt a charge in the air between them.

No way was he a phantom.

"O-o-oh, aye," he spoke again, his honeyed voice melting her. "Did I no' warn you there'd be some who wouldn't jump aside?"

Cilla stopped melting at once.

"Who *are* you?" She regarded him warily. "Where did you come from?"

"From a place more distant than you'd believe." He ignored her first question. "And I've good advice for you," he added, taking a step closer, slowly raising his shield until it brushed the tips of her breasts. "If you're after a true taste o' Scotland, hie yourself-"

"Hie myself?" She blinked.

"Take yourself," he clarified, scowling at her. "Quit this place and journey south. Inverness, the Isle of Skye, Stirling and Perth, perhaps even down to Edinburgh. Or Glasgow. Aye" – he appeared to warm to the idea - "Glasgow is where you should be! Loch Lomond is there and-"

"I saw Loch Lomond on the drive up here." Cilla frowned right back at him. "We stopped for lunch at Luss and I've never seen so many coach tour buses crowded into such a tiny car park. Or so many people jammed into souvenir shops no bigger than a postage stamp. If that is Scotland" - she scooted around him and made a wide sweeping gesture with her arm, taking in the rain-dampened parapet and the broad, silvery Kyle – "I'd rather be here."

He snorted. "This is the end of the world."

Cilla smiled. "Exactly."

Suddenly in her face again, he leaned close. "Be warned," he breathed, his dark gaze piercing her. "Sutherland is filled with lonely moors and dark bogs. Mountains so vast and bleak they'd eat a lass like you bones and all and no one would ever be the wiser."

"I *like* wild places." Cilla tossed back her hair, defiant.

"Yet you plan to spend the summer here" - he made a broad gesture of his own – "where every soul present is at least thrice your own age? The only kind of wild they'll give you is complaining that their haggis is too well spiced or that your uncle tells the same fireside tales too often."

Cilla stared at him.

His burr was getting to her again. What red-blooded female could resist a Scottish accent? She certainly couldn't. Much as she hated to admit it, he really was 6'4" of pure Highland male.

She'd always had a thing for Highlanders.

Especially kilted ones.

But the absurdity of his objection and, perhaps, the exhaustion of jetlag, bubbled up inside her until she near convulsed with sidesplitting, eye-tearing laughter.

"You made one mistake." She dashed at her cheeks when she finally caught herself. "There does seem to be a *soul* here who isn't 'thrice my age.'"

He cocked a brow. "Who might that be?"

She smiled, triumph hers. "You."

"I am more than thrice your age." He looked at her as earnestly as if he'd commented on the blowing mist. "Truth be told, I'm seven hundred, give or take a few years."

"Indeed?" Her mouth twitched. "I suppose you'll also tell me your name is Robert Bruce?"

"Nae, but I knew the man well."

"You did?" Her smile faded.

He nodded. "My father's people were Norman Scots as were the de Brus. Our families were friendly."

"We are speaking of King Robert the Bruce, right?" She tucked her hair behind her ear. "Medieval Scotland's greatest hero king?"

Kiltie drew himself up, seeming to grow even taller and more fierce-looking. “To my knowledge, Scotland has ne’er seen a greater ruler in any epoch,” he said, almost bristling. “But, aye, he is the one I meant.”

“I was afraid of that.” She drew a tight breath, the effect of his burr evaporating completely.

An uncomfortable thought rushed her. The corridors she’d sped through after taking a wrong turn had been dark and musty with an air of disuse.

That, and a sense that the endless passageways with their ancient portraits and faded tartan carpet runners might hold secrets. Like barred windows and meals served through a narrow slit in the door.

Bad things best left behind thick, rubber-covered walls and good, heavy locks.

“So you’ve figured it out?” He sounded pleased.

“Oh, yes.” She spoke as calmly as she could. “I believe I have.”

Not trusting herself to make eye contact and risk riling him, she stole a glance at the still-open parapet door.

It seemed miles away.

She swallowed and began inching in that direction as surreptitiously as possible. “I thought Uncle Mac and Aunt Birdie only catered to the aged. I didn’t realize-”

“The MacGhees aren’t aware I’m here.” An iron grip to her elbow halted her escape. “‘Tis a *ghost,* I am, sweetness, no’ a-”

“Ghosts can’t touch people!” Cilla shot a glance to where his long, strong fingers held her arm. She could feel his vigor and warmth pulsing clear up to her shoulder and down to her fingertips. “You-”

“I am what I say, and I can do much more than grab your arm.” He leaned in, his gaze locking with hers. “If I were so inclined, that is.”

“Oh!” She jerked free of his grasp.

He stepped back and folded his arms. “Oh, indeed,” he said, his eyes heating. “Be glad I am no’ interested-”

“Where did your shield go?” She stared at his crossed arms. “It’s gone.”

“Say you?” His mouth curved with a hint of amusement. “I but set it aside so I could fold my arms. See” – he uncrossed them and held up a hand, the shield appearing at once – “here it is again.”

Cilla’s eyes widened. “That’s impossible.”

He said nothing. He simply stood holding the targe in front of him at hip level, that faint smile still playing across his lips.

The smile didn’t reach his eyes, but it did give a vague idea of what could happen if ever he turned the power of a true, full-blooded

smile on her.

He was jaw-dropping handsome as is.

He wore a kilt and had the cutest knees she'd ever seen.

With a hot, melt-her-panties smile, he'd be beyond dangerous.

Indeed, for all she knew, he could be a madman, even a serial killer. His intense, unblinking stare certainly wasn't friendly. Far from it, the look he was giving her sent chills tinkling down her spine and tied her stomach in knots.

As if he knew, he flashed a grin that revealed two deep dimples.

Sexy dimples, entirely too charming.

She tried not to notice. "If you're really a ghost, why can I see you? Can everyone?"

"Everyone who is meant to, aye."

"That doesn't tell me much." She peered at him, still skeptical.

He laughed. "Sweet lass, just because I'm a ghost, doesn't mean I have all the answers. Truth is, some souls just see us. Most can't." He angled his head, looking thoughtful. "If you didn't know, a ghost could run naked through a crowd of people and chances are only one, if any, would notice.

"And" – he glanced aside – "there are times we can will it that everyone does see us. Though even then there will be some who do not. I cannae tell you why that is so."

He looked at her, his gaze penetrating. "It just is."

"Then why hasn't Aunt Birdie seen you?" She had him now. "She can see ghosts."

"No' when they wish to remain unseen."

"So you've been hiding from her?"

"Nae, I simply chose no' to disrupt her days." He made it sound so simple. 'One of the advantages to being a ghost is the privilege of staying out of sight when desired."

"I see." Cilla frowned, glanced at his targe. "How did you make your shield disappear and reappear?"

He shrugged. "It was just one of the many things ghosts can do."

That did it.

He was talking as if he really believed such nonsense.

Cilla tossed back her hair. "Look here, Scottie. If you're trying to scare me, it won't work." Her gaze flicked to his there-one-minute, gone-the-next shield. "I've seen crazies on the streets of Philly with better tricks than disappearing shields."

"Then what say you to disappearing men?"

"What-" Her jaw slipped as he vanished right in front of her.

His *words* hung in the air.

Rich, deep, and buttery-smooth, they stayed behind to taunt her. Each one slid through her like sun-warmed Scottish honey, pooling low and tantalizing even as they chilled her to the bone. Worst of all, they left her with little choice but to accept that Mr. Really-Wasn't-There genuinely wasn't.

It would seem he was exactly what he claimed.

A ghost.

Chapter Three

She thought he was feeble-minded.

Hardwick glowered after her, trying hard not to notice the bounce of her full round breasts as she fled the wall-walk. He also ignored the agitated strides of her long, shapely legs. Above all, he pretended not to see the swing of her luscious, well-made bottom.

The kind of bottom he could do all kinds of things to – and would – under different circumstances.

As it was, a muscle twitched in his jaw and vexation, not lust, swept him. Even so, he watched her go, his fists clenching when she darted into the stair tower.

"Thor's bluidy hammer." He threw back his head and glared at the roiling clouds, the fast-moving sheets of mist racing across the battlements.

He could scarce breathe for ire.

In nearly a millennium of intimate encounters with the fairer sex, nary a one had ever insulted him so deeply. Most women – of the Otherworld, admittedly, but even those of her realm who'd seen him – swooned and went all weak-kneed at a mere glance from him.

If he flashed a smile, they were his.

Totally beguiled, they freely offered their charms, claiming he was braw and irresistible.

Cilla Swanner clearly felt otherwise.

Crazy, she'd called him.

Not that the word mattered. The meaning was the same. She held him for addled. And he didn't like it at all.

Unfortunately, the thought of her tearing down the stair tower's tight, winding steps sat even worse with him. He needn't exactly traverse them to know how slick they were. Worn smooth by centuries of trudging, tromping feet, the slippery hollows of the stone steps could easily send her tumbling to her death if she tripped.

And she'd looked to be in a very trip-easy mood when she'd dashed through the parapet door. An assessment underscored by the echo of her hasty descent.

Hardwick shoved a hand through his hair and scowled as he listened.

He should amuse himself elsewhere.

Dunroamin boasted at least fifty rooms. Give or take a few, to be sure. A soul could lose hours in the disused wing alone, counting the rats, bats, and roosting doves dwelling there. Great swaths of cobwebs begged examination, several chambers held dust-covered piles of

candlesticks and pewter plates, clumps of moth-eaten velvet drapes, and even bolts of ancient tartan. Best of all, some of the walls hosted such a battalion of mold and mildew, the musty damp was a sure guarantee *she* wouldn't spend time there.

So there were possibilities.

Places where he could avoid her.

Too bad he'd grown accustomed to spending his days in the warmth and comfort of the castle's cozier bits.

Either way, he did need to stop mooning over her. Nor was it wise to make his head ache worrying about her. That road led to folly.

It was nothing to him if she fell.

If anything, he'd be spared hearing unholy cackles on the wind. Without her around to tempt him, the hell hags wouldn't have reason to chortle. He'd be free of the nuisance of trying to scare her away.

Something he wasn't at all sure he could do.

Frightening women, after all, wasn't his strong suit.

So why did the clatter of her hurrying feet grate on his nerves?

Sure he didn't know – or want to – his scowl deepened when he blinked and realized he'd somehow materialized on the stair tower's top landing.

He hadn't meant to move from the parapet wall.

He certainly hadn't planned to manifest again.

If she glanced back and saw him, she surely would take a nasty plunge.

A circular patch of hard, stone-flagged floor loomed at the bottom of the stair. He could make it out far below if he leaned forward and looked down. Just as he could see her bright head, her shining hair streaming behind her as she sped round the spiraling steps, racing ever downward.

Her shoe flying off her foot…

"Eeeee!" Cilla slipped, her right leg shooting out from under her in the same instant her loafer sailed into the air and went bouncing down the stairs.

In a blink, she knew she was doomed.

Her life, such as it was, flashed before her.

Then the stair tower tilted and spun and she pitched forward into nothingness.

Down, down she fell until, with a great *whoosh*, she slammed into something hard as stone yet as yielding as if she'd landed in someone's arms.

Powerful arms holding her crushed against a big, muscular body that felt suspiciously kilted.

Her eyes flew wide.

The back of her neck prickled.

"You!" She shifted in arms she couldn't see, shivers rippling all through her.

"Aye, me." The words hushed past her ear. Soft, burred, and unmistakably annoyed. "Fool that I am."

She almost choked. She was the fool. Thinking she could run from a man who could make himself invisible. Instead she'd only tripped and plunged down the stairs, making herself look clumsy as well as unnerved by ghosts.

Phantoms.

She wriggled against his steely-banded hold, but her efforts only made him tighten his arms even more. Her mouth opened and closed several times, her protest snagging in her throat at the very real feel of his rock-hard chest.

Something she should not be noticing.

Furious that she did, she frowned.

"You're a ghost." She hoped saying the words would make him seem more ghostly, less knight in shining armor, all gleaming steel and bold, searing glances.

"Aye, that I am." He laughed, not sounding Casperish at all.

"Then how can you-"

She broke off, feeling ridiculous. She was, after all, talking to thin air.

She swallowed. "Ghosts can't catch people."

"Is that so?" His scent, dark, spicy, and masculine, swirled around her. His Scottish accent, so rich and delectable, held a note of amusement. And even invisible, it was clear he'd lifted a mocking brow.

She could feel his hot gaze on her. A smoldering, intense kind of stare that made her wonder if one of his spectral powers was the ability to see through clothes. The deep rumble in his chest made it seem a distinct possibility.

Her breasts tightened on the thought and – heaven help her – great whirls of heat whipped through her, making her tingle everywhere. Something, perhaps the gold Celtic armband he wore, pressed into her side, and his scent, all clean wool and linen with a hint of sandalwood and man, persisted in doing funny things to her stomach.

Delicious flutters she had no business feeling in the arms of a man who wasn't really there.

A man who, by his own admission, hadn't really been there for nearly seven hundred years.

She shivered again, her mouth going drier. It didn't matter that he took her breath away. That he had molten brown eyes, sleek black

hair, and a voice sensual enough to send her into orgiastic bliss. Or even that he'd just saved her from certain death or, at the least, a few broken bones.

The cold, hard truth was…

He didn't exist.

Not really, anyway.

And buttery-burred, dark eyed Highland sex God or not, that was enough to give any girl the willies.

"Put me down!" She tried to jerk free again. "Now."

A snort answered her.

Then a swish of cool, silky hair slid across her cheek and she found herself clutched even tighter to his broad, impossibly-sculpted chest as she floated – no, as he carried her – down the remaining steps and set her on her feet.

"Next time I will no' use such care," he warned, stepping away so quickly the air where he'd been snapped back around her, cold and empty.

He was gone.

Whether she'd seen him disappear or not was beside the point. She felt his absence as strongly as if someone had vacuumed the air from her lungs.

He'd simply poofed himself away.

And she was losing it.

Sure of it, she stooped to snatch up her shoe and jam it back onto her foot. Then she blew a strand of hair off her face and glared up at the tight turnpike stair rising so innocently into the shadows.

The stones of the curved walls looked ancient and were dark and sooty in places where telltale iron brackets had once held smoking rush torches. A cold, damp wind whistled in through a few narrow slit-windows, lending to the stair tower's eerie ambiance.

Most telling of all, the worn stone steps had dips in their middle.

She stared at those grooves now, her pulse settling.

They were why she'd slipped.

She hadn't floated down the stairs in the arms of a roguish, sinfully handsome, seven-hundred-year-old Highland warrior in a kilt.

Her foot had simply slid on one of the slick, ancient steps, causing her to stumble the rest of the way down in a jet-lagged, zero-sleep induced stupor.

There hadn't been any sexy ghost.

Not in the stair tower or on the battlements.

Imagination wasn't her middle name for nothing. Everyone knew the mind created all sorts of havoc when people were foolish enough to run around on empty with sand grit scratching their eyes.

Anyone so far past the second-wind stage was bound to experience weirdness. Who could blame her if she'd seen fluttering cobwebs and turned them into plaids? Or heard the cold whistle of wind and imagined the purr of a smooth, whisky-deepened burr.

No, a soft, lilting burr not deep at all and that was calling her name.

Honoria the housekeeper.

Red-cheeked and with her great matronly bosom thrust forward like the bow of a tweed-draped ship, she came sailing around a corner just as Cilla straightened her clothes and stepped out of the stair tower.

"Ach, *mo ghaoil*, it's yourself!" The older woman hurried forward, her sturdy rubber-soled shoes silent on the plaid carpet-runner. "We were nigh after having all the staff search for you-"

"Mo gale?" Cilla blinked. The grit in her eyes stung like sandpaper.

The housekeeper waved a hand. "It means 'my dear,' is all," she said, taking Cilla's arm and leading her in the exact opposite direction she'd meant to go. "We were quite fashed about you."

"I got lost." Cilla felt herself flush.

She shoved back her hair and tried to keep her voice light. "I couldn't find the restrooms Aunt Birdie said were near the main staircase."

She kept everything else to herself.

No way would she tell the no-nonsense woman about the sexy ghost.

Nor did she care to admit that a simple search for the so-called loo had taken her into a dimly lit passage where the shadows had slid around her, blotting the way forward and backward. Or that the corridor had reeked so strongly of candle grease, old stone, and dark oak paneling that she'd feared she'd stepped into some kind of time warp.

"Right enough, that's where they are. The restrooms as you Yanks say. They're behind the big stairs, just." Honoria made a sympathetic clucking sound. "You're not the first to lose your way looking for them."

She leaned close, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial level. "That's the trouble with these old piles, all put together in fits and starts down the centuries. If any one of the late, great builders meant to make it easy for a soul to find his way about, a hundred years later there comes his great-great-grandson adding on his own bits and pieces and spoiling the plan."

"I like it."

"Americans always do." The housekeeper's chest puffed. "And

why not? Dunroamin isn't your average country house surrounded by the prerequisite sweep of lawn and gardens. With the exception of a tea-room, seasonal tours, and a souvenir shop, we offer a little of everything."

Looking proud, she rattled off the castle's charms. "We have the oldest bits, the tower and parapets and even a dank undercroft for medieval buffs. Then there's the Jacobean wing with its tall, south-facing bays for the stone-mullioned window enthusiast. And" – she winked – "we've more than enough Victorian gothic to please the soppiest romantics."

Cilla glanced out a tall, arch-topped window they were passing, caught a glimpse of rolling moors and mist. "And you have Sutherland."

"Nae, Sutherland has us." Honoria gave her a look so serious she wouldn't have dreamed of disagreeing. "We could travel across two oceans and as many continents and still the land would touch us, calling us home."

"Duthchas." Cilla's heart wrapped around the word. "It's the only Gaelic I know. *Dooch-hus.* Aunt Birdie taught it to me on one of her visits to Pennsylvania when I was little. She said it represents a Highlander's deep sense of oneness with his land and culture."

"No words can capture the feeling, *mo ghaoil,* but *Duthchas* comes close, aye." The housekeeper's expression softened. "Only when you've felt that love of the land pulsing here" – she clapped a hand to her breast – "can you truly understand a Highlander's heart. Your aunt does. She wears the far north well."

Something inside Cilla twisted.

She loved Scotland, too, and had dreamed of coming here since childhood. She'd also loved Scotsmen, even founding the Mad for Plaid Club when she was sixteen. Sadly, her obsession with tartan-draped men had overridden every warning bell when Grant A. Hughes III waltzed into her life, claiming Scottish roots. When he'd arrived, kilted, to take her to a Highland Games on one of their early dates, her fate had been sealed.

Feeling heat inch up the back of her neck, she flicked a speck of lint off her sleeve.

Then she did her best not to frown.

The swell-headed lout hadn't exactly ruined her enthusiasm for Scotland. But he'd made her wary of kilt-wearing, sporran-sporting Scots*men*.

"I know Aunt Birdie loves Sutherland," she blurted, pushing Grant the weasel from her mind. "Whenever she'd visit, her eyes would light when she spoke of Uncle Mac's home. She'd gush about its wild emptiness and what she called the vast stretches of sea, land, and

sky. She said even the air was different. That it was magical, and that once you'd inhaled it, you'd be forever in its spell."

"O-o-oh, aye, that's the way of it." Honoria nodded agreement. "You'll lose your heart, too. Everyone does."

Stepping close, she fixed Cilla with a shrewd stare. "Why do you think so many English incomers are for settling here?" She put back her shoulders, clearly warming to a favorite topic. "They come north, breathe our clean air and peat smoke, fall in love with our starry nights and quiet, even the days when our mist blows sideways and suddenly – or so they say – the city fumes and crush of London or Manchester or Liverpool is something they can't bear anymore."

The words spoken, she pressed her lips tight. As if those incomers were an entirely different kettle of fish than Aunt Birdie.

"Too bad they often feel differently when, come winter, they discover they need thermal underwear and learn that our weekly entertainment is Quiz Night at the Village Hall or a *ceilidh* over at Old Jock's croft down by Talmine Bay." Honoria's chin lifted. "Fiddlers come from as far away as Lairg and Ullapool to play at Old Jock's sessions. Yet-"

"Wait." Cilla stopped before an oak-planked door studded with rusted iron. She was sure she'd passed through it earlier, certain it'd stood ajar.

Yet now it was bolted.

"I'd swear I came up here through that door." She eyed the heavy-looking drawbar, the fine hairs on her nape lifting again. "It was open."

"Och, it couldn't have been." The housekeeper shook her head. "That way leads to a house wing we never use, save for storage." She reached to jiggle the iron latch, proving its secured state. "The door's kept mostly locked since a fire swept parts of that wing in the 1930s. I'd be surprised if even your uncle could slide back the drawbar."

"But-"

From somewhere came the sound of knuckles cracking. "Shall I-"

"Oh!" Cilla's heart stopped.

The hot Scot filled her mind again. She was sure she'd heard his voice. Almost positive she caught a whiff of sandalwood and musk on the chill, dust-moted air.

Just when she'd convinced herself she'd imagined him.

She slid a glance over her shoulder, seeing nothing.

Naturally.

Her heart began to pound again, her hard-won cool crumbling.

Honoria remained unruffled. "Be glad the door is sealed," she said, pressing her point. "That's also the wing with the ghost room."

"Ghost room?"

"So we call it now." Honoria took her arm, pulling her down the passageway. "The room used to be a nursery."

Cilla glanced back at the locked door.

She'd done so well putting the sexy ghost from her mind. Yet now she could almost see him standing beside the ancient door, flexing his fingers above the drawbar as if he meant to seize it any moment.

Pull it back and open the door – just to prove that he could.

She swallowed, her pulse leaping.

"Honoria…." She spoke before she lost nerve. "Is the ghost room haunted by a Highland warrior who wears a big sword and carries a round, medieval shield?"

"By glory, nae! More's the pity." The older woman tossed her a glance. "It's not a braw lad but a poor serving lass. She hails from the days of Culloden if the tales be true."

"The mid-1700s?" A chill slid down Cilla's spine. "Uncle Mac swears there aren't any ghosts at Dunroamin," she argued, the comment causing an unexpected tightening in her chest. "I asked him."

Honoria scoffed. "That one wouldn't own to a bogle's presence if one bit him on the nose. Ask your auntie about the lass. She'll tell you the truth of it."

"Aunt Birdie saw her?"

"Och, nae, but she understands the possibilities."

The housekeeper paused to run a finger along the edge of a dark oaken table set into a wall niche. She frowned when the finger came away dust smeared.

Cilla waited, not really wanting to talk about ghosts, but curious all the same.

Honoria drew a breath. "The maid's name was Margaret MacDonald," she revealed, her voice dropping. "She was a local lass, born right here in the shadow of Ben Hope and Ben Loyal. Fair, she was, with a head of dark curls and a bright, dimpled smile. Not a day passed that she wasn't smiling or laughing. Until" – she paused, her eyes glittering in the lamplight – "she caught the laird's eye."

"He seduced her." Cilla already knew. "Then he sent her away pregnant."

"Aye, so it was," the housekeeper confirmed. "But the only place he sent her was into a hidey-hole behind the bricks of one of the chimneys."

"He walled her up?"

Honoria nodded. "Word was put about that she jumped off a cliff, heartbroken over the death of a local gallant who'd lost his life at

Culloden. But she started appearing not long thereafter and the truth came out."

Cilla swallowed. "Her body was found?"

"Aye, it was. But not till repairs were done on the chimney in the early 1900s." They'd reached the top of the main stair, and the housekeeper turned to look at her. "The laird confessed the deed on his deathbed, though he didn't have the breath to reveal where he'd put her."

"That's horrible." Cilla shuddered as they began descending the stairs. "Is she still seen?"

"Not these days, and there's little chance of her appearing again, so you needn't worry." Honoria's pace turned brisk, her tweed skirt swishing. "Your Uncle Mac was the last soul to see her."

"Uncle Mac?" Cilla couldn't believe it. "He's the greatest skeptic there is."

"He wasn't when he was three years old." Honoria stopped on the landing. "He just doesn't remember seeing her," she said, her mouth quirking. "He was ill with a fever and she sat on a chair in his room for a week, watching over him and singing to him until he recovered."

"She was worried about him and wanting to help." The idea squeezed Cilla's heart. "Not being able to have her own babe, she tried to nurture other ones."

"That's what we believe, just." Honoria peered back up the way they'd come, her gaze on the shadows at the top of the stairs. "She only ever showed herself if a child of the house fell seriously ill. Once the danger passed, she'd leave. Your uncle was the last child reared at Dunroamin. Now, with the residents all being of a certain age, we suspect she's found her peace."

"Or she's moved on to look after little ones elsewhere?" Cilla's voice hitched on the words.

Margaret MacDonald's story put a different spin on ghosts.

She sympathized with the heartbroken serving girl.

"I hope she's well, wherever she is."

"Ach, she'll be feeling better than me with my knees e'er aching from traipsing up and down these stairs." Honoria dusted her jacket sleeve, all business again. "Come now, and we'll sit you down in front of the library fire and you'll have a cup of tea to warm you."

"That'd be nice," Cilla lied, certain she'd soon need the loo again if she had to drink more tea.

What she needed was a hot shower and bed.

But when she opened the library door a few moments later, rather than book-lined walls and tables spread for tea, it was a teetering assortment of all manner of containers that greeted her.

Plastic buckets, old pitchers and jugs, and even seed trays and empty tin cans filled the doorway, each unlikely item crammed so tightly together she couldn't see anything but darkness beyond the towering pile.

"Yikes!" She jumped when a broken-handled casserole pot rolled off its perch and tumbled forward, nearly conking her on the head before it bounced onto the carpeted floor with a dull thud. "What's all this?"

"Not the library." The housekeeper was right behind her. "That's the closet where we keep buckets and whatnot to catch the drips from the roof."

"The roof leaks?" Cilla couldn't believe it.

"Aye, it does." Honoria snatched up the casserole pot. "Only in the worst rainstorms, but then the plink-plinkety-plonks of the dripping water is so loud that a body can't hear itself think."

"Aunt Birdie and Uncle Mac didn't mention-"

"There'll be much they haven't told you about the goings-on at Dunroamin, but" – the housekeeper caught her eye – "you'll be hearing it soon enough."

"Aunt Birdie said there are difficulties." Cilla stepped aside as the older woman thrust the casserole pot back into the chaos and shut the closet door. "Do you think someone deliberately messed with the roof?"

"Age and wear damaged the roof and naught else." Honoria started down the corridor again. "Though I can tell you that your aunt and uncle meant to have the roof repaired some while ago and would have done if business hadn't taken such a bad turn."

"Oh, dear." Cilla hurried after her, hot shower and bed forgotten. "Water drips can be devastating to an old house like this."

"Exactly." Honoria didn't break stride. "That's just what we suspect certain bodies are hoping."

"Who would want to hurt Uncle Mac and Aunt Birdie?"

"Someone up to no good." The housekeeper's voice was sharp. "One thing is sure as I'm standing here" - she stopped before a magnificent carved oak door, a hand on the latch – "it isn't ghosties what's causing the furor."

Cilla blinked. "Ghosties?"

Behind her, she thought she heard a rustle of wool. Kilted wool – she knew the sound well - coming closer as if to listen in on their conversation.

Unfazed, the housekeeper sniffed.

"Aye, ghosties, if one was of a mind to accept such twaddle."

"I thought you believed in them?"

"Ach, and I do right enough." Her tone rang with conviction.

“But there are ghosties and *ghosties*. I’ll no’ be buying that a gaggle of them want to scare away Dunroamin’s paying residents.”

Leaning close, she pinned Cilla with a stare. “I don’t just work here, see you? I live and breathe this house. I know every creaking floorboard, every groan in the woodwork, each sticking window, and which shutters rattle in the night wind.”

She straightened, her hand still on the door latch. “I also know Dunroamin’s ghosts. The bogles we have here, such as poor Margaret MacDonald, love Dunroamin and would never seek to frighten folk.”

Cilla wasn’t so sure about that, but before she could voice an opinion, the housekeeper swung open the library door and three things leapt at her, chasing Honoria and her bogles from her mind.

One, she’d never seen so much plaid.

Though the requisite mahogany bookcases lined the walls and the handsome fire surround gleamed in the expected black marble and the usual ancestral portraits held pride of place throughout the large room, a palette of tartanware covered every other inch of available space.

Heavy velvet drapes styled the windows in a sett of deep red squares and stripes. Instead of the customary Persian carpets, richly-patterned plaid rugs leant warmth to the wide-planked polished floor, while tartan wallpaper peeked from between the bookshelves, gilded picture frames, and occasional molting stag heads.

Even the scattered sofas and wing chairs welcomed in various-shaded tartan dress, some offering the additional comfort of several folded plaid blankets and stout tartan-covered ottomans.

In short, the library bulged plaid.

Cilla blinked, the colorful array almost hurting her eyes.

The housekeeper, clearly immune, strode past her into the candlelit room. Looking wholly in her element, she made straight for a long tartan-draped table near a wall of tall mullioned windows.

Spread for tea with generous servings of oatcakes and cheeses, cakes and chocolate-dipped biscuits, and large silver platters of salmon and thin-sliced roast beef, it wasn’t the tartan tablecloth that took Cilla by surprise – not after seeing the room - but the two multi-armed candelabrums illuminating the tea goods.

Real wax tapers burned in the wall scones, as well, and a quick glance around showed no modern lighting at all.

Today’s world treads easy at Dunroamin and our residents appreciate feeling embraced by earlier times.

Aunt Birdie’s words – spoken years ago in Yardley – rushed back to Cilla now. Dunroamin really was like a living history museum; a place where those who loved old things could take refuge.

Only the dear old things she’d expected to find crowding the

library listening to Uncle Mac's afternoon tea talk by the fireside, proved so scarce in number they could be counted on one hand.

And that was the second thing that surprised her upon entering the room.

The third, and most alarming, was Uncle Mac himself.

Larger than life as he was, he couldn't be missed and Cilla spotted him right away, despite the dimness of the shadowy, candlelit room.

As expected, he strode to and fro before a crackling hearth fire, his pipe in one hand and a glittering crystal dram glass in the other.

He was definitely holding court, emphasizing each booming word with a grand flourish of his smoke-trailing pipe. His reflection in the huge gilt mirror above the mantelpiece gave the illusion that two Uncle Macs paced there, kilt-swinging, red-faced, and agitated.

Cilla froze.

She lifted a hand to her breast and shook her head.

Then she blinked and knuckled her eyes, but she hadn't been mistaken.

Uncle Mac – a man who defined merriment - was furious.

And he was ranting about ghosts.

Viking ghosts.

Chapter Four

"Vikings, my eye!"

Mac MacGhee stabbed the air with his pipe. "I dinnae care who says they saw a ghostly band of horn-helmeted Norsemen slinking past my peat banks, I say they saw bog mist!"

Cilla stared at him, too surprised to step out of the shadows near the door.

She did press a hand to her cheek. She needed it there to keep her jaw from dropping.

She'd never seen her uncle so upset.

That he was, stood beyond question. His ruddy face glowed apple red, and he'd swelled his great barrel chest like an enraged Highland bull.

"If not bog mist" – he glared at his audience from behind a cloud of cherry-scented smoke - "then sea haar."

"Here, here." A dapper looking gentleman with a bald pate and a trim silver mustache puffed at his own pipe and nodded enthusiastic agreement.

Uncle Mac swung toward him. "Next they'll be seeing mermaids swimming in the Kyle!"

"Jolly right." Silver mustache shifted in an over-stuffed plaid chair and crossed his legs, revealing heavy hill-walking boots that struck an odd contrast to his neat gray suit. "Mist or moon glow, I say they also took a dram too many before they went to bed."

"Pah!" A tiny white-haired woman seared him with a stare. "I know what I saw and I'll not have either of you say me otherwise."

An equally petite woman caning her way to the well-laden tea table took her side. "Just because neither of you saw them doesn't mean they weren't there."

Reaching the table, she began helping herself to a generous serving of roast beef and boiled potatoes. "Only the other night, I heard whooping out over the moors. Shouts, they were, and in no language of this day!"

"You heard geese." Uncle Mac glowered at her.

She waved the serving fork at him. "I heard Vikings! I'd recognize their yells anywhere," she declared, jutting her chin. "I'm of Norse descent, after all."

Uncle Mac snorted.

Show me a Highlander who isn't, Cilla thought she heard him grumble beneath his breath.

The first old dear – the white-haired one - leaned forward then.

“Leo saw them, too,” she announced, stroking the little black-and-tan dachshund curled on her lap. “He growled at them out my window.”

“Hah!” Silver mustache slapped his thigh. “Like as not, your fool bird was sitting on the ledge.”

“Leo doesn’t growl at Gregor.” The tiny woman sat back in her chair, looking smug. “Only you.”

A flurry of coughs and titters rippled through the library.

“Enough!” Uncle Mac tossed down his whisky and sent a warning look to the other residents.

Silver mustache and the tiny woman exchanged challenging glares.

“Becalm yourselves.” Honoria stepped between them, bearing cups of tea and a plate of chocolate biscuits. “Whatever was seen, we’ll soon get to the bottom of it.”

It was then that Cilla saw the shield.

Round, studded, and looking suspiciously familiar, it appeared to hover in the shadows near one of the Jacobean window bays.

She sucked in her breath when it settled on a cushioned window seat, perfectly upright as if someone had propped it against the leaded panes.

Propped, or held it.

Her heart began to thump and she started to back out of the room, but a swirl of her aunt’s exotic perfume enfolded her, announcing Aunt Birdie’s arrival just as she appeared at Cilla’s side.

Across the room, silver mustache pointed the stem of his pipe at the housekeeper. “I say it’d serve better if you passed around digestive biscuits rather than chocolate ones.”

He slid a narrow-eyed look at the white-haired woman sitting near him. “I’ve some chewable tablets in my room if that should fail.”

“I do not suffer from indigestion.” The woman purposely bit into a chocolate-coated biscuit. “Though” – she dabbed at her mouth with a linen napkin – “you could easily give it to me.”

“Maybe I should just slip up to my room.” Cilla spoke low, her gaze on the shield.

“Oh, don’t mind them.” Aunt Birdie clearly didn’t see the medieval targe. “Those two always bicker.”

“Even so-” Cilla jumped when the shield moved.

Only a few inches, but still…

It’d slid sideways as if someone pushed it out of the way to sit down.

She swallowed.

Aunt Birdie’s eyes twinkled, her attention still on the two warring residents.

Happily oblivious to anything else, she hooked an elegantly

manicured hand through Cilla's arm.

"That's Colonel Achilles Darling from Bibury in Gloucestershire - the northern Cotswolds – and Violet Manyweathers," she confided, leaning close. "The colonel joined us after his wife's death. Word is, his one great love was a Strathnaver lass from these parts. He never forgot her, or so the tale goes, so when he could, he came north to finally be near her."

"Violet Manyweathers?"

Surely the two weren't lovebirds.

"Oh, no." Aunt Birdie shook her head. "The colonel's long lost love died years ago. She's buried nearby. Violet is local. She was born in Melness, the tiny crofting hamlet just down the road."

Cilla nodded.

It was hard to concentrate knowing *he* sat in the window seat.

She glanced down, making certain that her top wasn't clinging too tightly. It'd been bad enough to have her nipples pucker when he'd swept her with such a heated look in the stair tower.

Something told her then and there that he was a breast man and that was definitely where he'd fixed his gaze now.

She could feel it sliding over her. Dipping into the deep-shadowed swells of her cleavage and gliding round to caress and explore every other inch of her. No man had ever looked at her so boldly and his intense perusal sent a sweet, hot-pulsing thrill beating all through her.

It was a very pleasurable sensation.

Embarrassed, she tilted her chin and hoped her aunt would think the room's chill was responsible for any visible shivers.

Just now, Aunt Birdie's gaze was on Dunroamin's residents. Smiling, she turned back to Cilla. "Violet Manyweathers-"

"Manyweathers doesn't sound like a Strathnaver name." Cilla jumped on the chance to get her mind off of Mr. Really-Wasn't-There and his heated stares.

She also didn't want to think of Margaret MacDonald. Dunroamin's onetime nursery ghost whose sad plight, if true, implied that ghosts could have wholly legitimate reasons for walking among the living.

If her ghost had a valid reason for haunting Dunroamin, she was sure she didn't want to know it. Hoping she looked no more than mildly curious, she tapped a finger to her chin and pretended to ponder.

"Are you sure Violet's from around here?"

"Oh, yes." Aunt Birdie glanced at the tiny woman. "She married an Englishman – Mr. Manyweathers of London – and, like the colonel, decided to come here when she found herself alone. She

missed the far north and claims she never adjusted to London."

"And Gregor?" Cilla already knew Leo the dachshund was Dunroamin's resident mascot. "Violet's bird?"

Aunt Birdie smiled. "He's a great skua. Violet-"

"A great what?" Cilla's eyes widened.

Now she did have something else to think about. She'd expected a canary or a parakeet.

"Great skua," Aunt Birdie repeated. "They're large brown predatory birds also known as bonxies." Her gaze flicked to the colonel. "Violet found him abandoned with an injured wing when he was just a wee little thing. It was quite a sensation as bonxies usually nest in the moorlands of the Northern Isles. Violet nursed him back to health. She set him free in due time, but he decided to stay."

"In her room?"

"Heavens, no." Aunt Birdie's eyes twinkled. "Gregor lives outside, though he doesn't stray far. What he does do" – she leaned close to whisper in Cilla's ear – "is make the colonel's life miserable. That's why he wears those heavy boots and a deerstalker hat."

Cilla glanced at him, taking a closer look at the tweedy dual-rimmed cap with the telltale side flaps on a small table beside his chair.

"The bird dive bombs him?"

Aunt Birdie nodded. "He has, yes. That's what bonxies do. They swoop down on anyone they view as a threat. Gregor" – she waved a hand as if to lighten the bird's transgressions – "mostly just pecks at the colonel's feet whenever he dares to go outside."

Cilla laughed. She couldn't help it. "That's why the colonel and Violet don't get along?"

"One reason, yes." Aunt Birdie urged her forward. "The colonel can be difficult. He's a bit particular. But come, meet everyone for yourself."

Before Cilla let her aunt pull her out of the shadows, she slid a glance at the window bay.

There –she was sure - sat the only soul she really wanted to meet.

Well, the only one she'd wish to meet if he were really there.

But the shield was gone.

And if he was still sitting there – or standing for all she knew – she couldn't see him.

Not even a dust mote stirred.

She did see the drifting mist outside. It was thinning, though, and pale evening sun now glinted off the tall, many-paned windows. Her ghost wasn't anywhere in sight. Instead, prisms of light slanted across the polished oaken floor and scattered tartan rugs.

Through the windows, she caught glimpses of a paved terrace hemmed by an herbaceous border and a wide sweep of velvet-green lawn, the latter bounded by a dry-stone wall that looked to be smothered beneath a welter of climbing roses.

Beyond the wall, rough slopes of heather and rock-strewn moors rolled steadily away toward the majestic Ben Loyal, the empty hills sparse save scattered thickets of yellow-blooming whin and broom.

Cilla shivered.

She didn't know about horn-helmeted Vikings, but regardless of Uncle Mac's opinion, she could well imagine other kinds of ghosts choosing such a wild and lonely landscape as their favorite haunting ground.

Kilted ghosts, long disappeared from history, but still alive in the Celtic twilight.

Her heart began to thump.

She could almost see her hot-eyed Highlander ghost out there.

Proud, daring, and take-her-breath-away handsome, he'd stride the hills, ever ready to blood his sword in the name of clan and glory.

He'd also know how to turn a perfectly innocent bed of heather into a scene of such hot, ravishing seduction, the lucky woman he chose to devour would be left so sated and limp-limbed she wouldn't be able to walk for a week.

Oh, yes, she could well see him doing that.

If he did it wearing his kilt, the lass might not ever recover.

And she'd obviously let the library's Highland flummery get to her.

"The view can grab you, I know." Aunt Cilla spoke right from her mind.

Cilla started. "I-"

She broke off when she caught a faint drift of sandalwood and musk coming from the window bay.

He was back.

For one tantalizing moment, she thought she saw him. All hot and sensual Highland male, his dark, heated gaze almost burning her. He sat perfectly still, his gold armband and the brass studs on his shield catching the light on the ancient glass panes.

"Grab her, the curls o' my beard!" Uncle Mac joined them and the image vanished. "She's made of sterner stuff than to stand making moon eyes at the moors. Unlike-" he flashed a look at his wife – "some people I know."

A chorus of chortles echoed around the room as a handful of elderly heads bobbed agreement.

Colonel Darling lifted his pipe. "Here, here!" he cried, a smoke

wreath curling round his shining pate.

Aunt Birdie only smiled. “Moon eyes, you say?” She tilted her fair head. “If it restores your good cheer to say so, dear, I’m all for it.”

Uncle Mac met her calm with belligerence. “Any chieftain worth his salt would sour on hearing about Vikings tramping round in his peat banks.”

“Viking ghosts,” Violet corrected.

Ignoring her, Uncle Mac slung an arm around Cilla’s shoulders. “Come, those of you still wanting to harp on that string! Hear what my sensible young niece from America has to say about marauding Norsemen.”

“Ahhh….” Cilla shot another glance at the windows. A cloud must’ve passed over the sun because the garden and rolling moorland beyond now stood in shadow. “I’m sure there are no ghostly Vikings out there.”

It was the best she could do.

She’d also spoken true. She was sure there weren’t any Vikings on the moors.

Unfortunately, she really could imagine her kilted hottie out there. But no one needed to know that.

“I’d think that if there were Viking ghosts about,” she added, just because Uncle Mac was still watching her from under his eyebrows, “they’d rather haunt the Northern Isles or the Hebrides, don’t you?”

“Aye, they would!” Her uncle’s voice rang with triumph. “Shetland and Orkney is where they’d be. Sure as there’s dew on morning grass!”

Rocking back on his heels, he curled his hands beneath his belt. “Folk in those isles are more Norse than Scottish, even today.”

“Be that as it may” – Violet Manyweathers set down her teacup – “there were Vikings a-plenty in these parts.”

Uncle Mac glared at her, tight-lipped.

“Fool woman.” Colonel Darling gave her a look of palpable annoyance. “If they were here, they aren’t now.”

“Say you.” The tiny woman held her ground. “They go rampaging over the moors almost every night, as I’ve been telling everyone for weeks.”

“If there are such ghosts” – Honoria moved between them again, gliding forward to put a hand on Violet’s shoulder – “do you not think they’d be at Balnakeil, on the beach, rather than Dunroamin’s peat hags?”

“Balnakeil?” Cilla looked from the housekeeper to her uncle. “Peat hag? Is that a witch?”

Honoria answered her. “Balnakeil is a place and” – she kept

her hand firmly on Violet's shoulder – "a peat hag is a bog. It's where we go to cut peat from the moor."

"Oh." Cilla made a mental note to secure a Scots dictionary.

"It's where the bogles are." The old dear with the cane looked her way. "Those are ghosts," she added, turning her attention back to her roast beef and boiled potatoes.

"Humph." Uncle Mac scowled, his jaw more set than ever.

Taking a step toward the semicircle of bright-eyed if elderly residents, he shook a finger at the diminutive female with a walking stick propped against her chair.

"Dinnae you start down that road, as well, Flora Duthie," he scolded. "Peat, plaid, and whisky is the true grit o' any Heilander, with a touch o' pipe skirl tossed in for good measure. But" – he snapped his brows together, fixing her with a scowl – "leave the Celtic whimsy to tourists and incomers soft-minded enough to buy into the like."

Flora Duthie popped a boiled potato into her mouth and frowned back at him.

"Buy into?" She aimed her fork at a succulent slice of roast beef. "Centuries of believing in Highland magick cannae be so easily erased."

"Highland magick!" Uncle Mac poured himself poured himself a second dram. "Much as we at Dunroamin strive to live in the past" – he gulped down the whisky – "this is the twenty-first century."

"Then what's with Balnakeil?" Cilla eyed him, some sixth sense warning her that the place was important.

Proving it, he slapped down the dram glass and began pulling on his beard.

He was clearly pretending not to have heard her.

"A Viking grave was found there." Aunt Birdie enlightened her. "Not all that long ago either. The discovery was quite by accident, the burial site only revealed when storm winds shifted a sand dune. It was a boy's grave, but filled with all manner of Norse goods."

A chill slid down Cilla's spine.

She rubbed her arms. "So there were Vikings here?"

"Balnakeil is at Durness." Uncle Mac remained stubborn. "Miles away around the whole of Loch Eriboll and nigh to Cape Wrath."

"You're after saying that makes a difference?" Violet sat up straighter. On her lap, Leo barked. "The distance between here and Balnakeil Bay – or anywhere - didn't matter to the poor souls who've left Dunroamin."

She leaned back in her chair, stroking the dachshund's ears. "They knew something strange was-"

"Perhaps they left because of your pesky skua?" Colonel Darling waved his pipe at her. "That bird will be the reason and not ghostly bands of yelling Vikings."

"Every resident who left saw them." Violet rested her case. "They told me so."

"They told me as well." Uncle Mac swelled his chest. "That doesn't mean they weren't seeing bog mist."

He turned to Cilla. "You Yanks call it swamp gas, I'm thinking?"

She nodded, scarce hearing him.

The shield was back.

This time it was floating in front of the windows, as if someone held it at waist level or lower as they paced.

Cilla swallowed, her eyes widening.

Around her, voices rose and fell as her aunt and uncle and Dunroamin's residents argued about Viking ghosts and the likelihood – or not - of them haunting Uncle Mac's peat banks. The words soon became an indistinguishable buzz, the rush of her own pulse in her ears blotting the din.

No one else seemed to see the shield.

She couldn't take her eyes off it.

Nor could she deny that the library no longer smelled of just wood smoke and lemon polish, old books, and leather, but overwhelmingly of sandalwood and musk.

And not just a faint whiff clinging to the window bay.

O-o-oh, no.

Heady, rich, and darkly masculine, the scent surrounded her. Pervading the air, its spicy manliness seduced. Once again she felt strong, powerful arms closing around her. She remembered, too, the hardness of a plaid-draped muscled chest and the grip of capable hands holding her firm.

Long manly fingers splayed a tad too intimately across her hip.

Her face flamed. Everyone knew what they said about men with long, well-formed fingers.

She bit her lip.

Whether it meant she was going around the bend or not, the thought of the hot-eyed kiltie's hands set more butterflies flittering in her belly than Grant A. Hughes III had ever given her.

Him and every other boyfriend she'd known.

She drew a tight breath. Then she willed the ghost – or whatever he was - to show himself along with his infernal shield.

But if he even was the one holding it, he remained invisible.

Temptingly close but out of her grasp.

Then the shield vanished as quickly as it'd appeared, almost as

if it'd been whisked out of thin air.

His luscious scent evaporated, too. Disappearing as if she'd imagined it.

She angled her head and tried to sniff as discreetly as possible – only to have Flora Duthie cane her way over to her, offering an orange blossom-scented, lace-edged hanky.

"Here, my dear." The woman's rheumy eyes brimmed with understanding. "It's a cold, wet summer, just," she observed, nodding sagely. "I, too, have the bug."

Cilla took the blessedly clean-looking handkerchief and mumbled thanks.

Not that she'd registered half of what the old woman had said.

In the moment she'd hobbled up to Cilla, something in the library shifted. A there one minute, gone the next *whoosh* of cold air where there should have been none, next to the fireplace.

Or simply a shivering across her soul, a sifting of time and space no one else noticed.

Then that sensation, too, was gone.

What remained was the reckless knowledge that she didn't want him to go.

Ghost, product of jetlag, victim of a plight such as Margaret MacDonald's or whatever, he excited her more than he could ever frighten her.

Not that she cared to admit anything so unwise. So she did what she could do.

She frowned.

Best to push such thoughts from her mind before they became too dangerous. Thinking about the hot Scot's big, strong hands, and what they could do to her, was already way too tempting.

Over by the Jacobean window bay, Bran of Barra grinned.

"Heigh-ho!" He waved Hardwick's shield above his head, his eyes dancing with merriment. "I thought you were done with this thing?"

Hardwick ignored his question. "I thought you went back to your island keep?"

"Eh?" Bran feigned astonishment. "Why should I hie myself home to Barra and miss all the fun here? Besides, I'm thinking you need someone to look out for you."

Hardwick snorted. "Were that so, you can be sure it wouldn't be you."

"Hah! You ought to count your blessings I deigned to come see you."

Hardwick gave his longtime friend and sometimes nemesis a

pointed look.

"I came here to get away from my old life," he said, trying not to let his annoyance show.

Or that he really was glad-hearted for Bran's jovial company.

"You mean your afterlife." Bran raised his arms above his head and cracked his knuckles. "We ghosties do have our limitations."

Hardwick glared at him, his gladness fading.

"Glower all you will." Bran lowered his arms. "I say your wits have left you."

"I've only lost that which has plagued me for centuries." Hardwick brushed at his sleeve. "There's naught wrong with my wits."

Bran arched a brow.

"Say you? That's twice now you've kept yourself invisible but forgot to cloak your shield." He leapt backwards when Hardwick tried to snatch it from him. "You should be more careful. The lass can see you."

"She saw you, too." Hardwick pretended to examine his knuckles, then whirled to grab his shield.

Success his, he flashed a smile. "You should learn to watch for feints. For a Hebridean chieftain, you're slow on your reflexes."

Bran laughed. "Because I am such a great chieftain indeed, I have no need of sharp reflexes." Eyes twinkling, he leaned close. "Did you no' ken, Seagrave, that I'm so feared, there isnae a soul in all broad Scotland daring enough to sail to Barra to challenge me!"

"This isnae your Barra."

"To be sure, it isnae." Bran's blue gaze shifted, latching onto the delectable rounds of Cilla Swanner's buttocks. "I dinnae think I've e'er enjoyed such a sweetmeat in my bed. Er" – he coughed, then pounded his chest with a balled fist – "in my hall."

"You frightened her." Hardwick took hold of his friend's bearded chin and angled his head away from the girl. "If she didnae see you, she sensed you and felt ill at ease. Have a care that doesnae happen again." Hardwick let his tone carry a bit of steel. "I'll be watching you, be warned."

"Hah! I knew that was the way the cat jumped." Bran's face split in a grin. "But I'll no' believe I scared her, handsome lad that I am. Now yourself-"

"What she thinks of me scarce matters." Hardwick tightened his grip on his shield. "She means even less to me, much as I'd like to see her gone."

Bran applied himself to smoothing the folds of his plaid, his lips twitching. "You've a strange way o' showing indifference."

Hardwick harrumphed.

His friend – if he was even wont to still consider him one –

clapped him on the shoulder. “Dinnae mind me,” the lout said, smiling cheerily. “Seeing as I’ve yet to lose my heart, I shouldn’t speak in judgment.”

“Nae, you shouldn’t.” Hardwick turned toward the windows and assumed a casual stance, his gaze on the rolling moorland beyond the garden wall.

Across the library, gasps and disgruntled murmurings rose at something one of the graybeards said, and Hardwick’s frown returned.

He wasn’t at all pleased by the things he’d heard since following Cilla into the plaid-festooned room.

Dunroamin’s troubles were not his own.

He shouldn’t get involved.

“If you’re truly wishing to see her gone,” Bran spoke from beside him, “perhaps one of the raiding Norsemen will take her off your hands. They’re known to favor blue-eyed flaxen haired wenches.”

Hardwick slid him a disgusted look.

Bran shrugged. “The gel does have the look o’ the North about her.”

“And you have the clapper tongue of an old woman.” Hardwick glared at him. “Dinnae tempt me to cut it from you!”

“Och, but you wound me.” Bran laughed.

Looking anything but offended, he plucked a cup of ale out of the air and took a long swallow. “I only sought to ease your mind since the lass clearly occupies it. If the Vikings snatched her-”

“There aren’t any Vikings here.”

“So you say.”

“So I know.” Hardwick turned his attention back on the thin mist drifting across the moors. “Think you I wouldn’t have noticed them?”

“Yon graybeards think they’re here.” Bran dropped onto a window seat and stretched out his legs, crossing them at the ankles. “Did you not know the folk here have been fashing about the like?”

“Nae, I didn’t know.” Hardwick didn’t bother to keep the annoyance out of his voice. He’d been keeping an eye out for sag-breasted, knotty-fingered hell hags, not Vikings. “I haven’t heard them speak of it until now. I’m a ghost no’ a mind reader.”

“There does appear to be trouble afoot here. If I were you, I’d-”

“And if I were you” – Hardwick spun around to face him – “I’d no’ be getting so comfortable on that window seat. Isn’t it about time you take yourself back to the lovelies whiling their time at your keep?”

Bran grinned.

Then he lifted his ale cup to his lips, sipping with deliberate

leisure. “As you well know, my men and those who deign to visit my hall are more than able to see to the needs of my female guests.”

Hardwick scowled at him.

Heat began inching up the back of his neck.

Blessedly, nary a trace of it slid across his loins. His best piece remained at ease. Unlike in days of old when the mere thought of the enticements of Bran’s hall flamed his blood and sent him hastening to sift himself into the midst of his long-time friend’s continuous joy fests.

Unfortunately, he was almost certain his newfound loss of interest in Bran’s beauties had something to do with Cilla Swanner.

He risked a glance at her but jerked his gaze away almost as quickly.

By Thor’s bluidy hammer, she was kneeling on the floor!

No longer standing about frowning, she’d dropped to all fours, her well-rounded buttocks lifted in the air. Plump and delectable, they pointed right at him, bobbing temptingly as if she were offering herself to him.

And in a boldly erotic manner few red-blooded men could resist.

Ghostly or otherwise.

Hardwick clenched his hands on his shield and bit back a curse as the heat at the back of his neck flashed through him, spreading everywhere.

Including just where he didn’t need it.

It took all his strength to keep himself from running full rock-granite hard.

He’d known modern day women could be brazen, but ne’er would have believed this one would resort to such a siren’s trick to win his attention.

And in full view of her aunt and uncle.

Not to mention Dunroamin’s residents.

“She’s no’ trying to tempt you.” Bran’s amused voice drawled from the window bay. “She’s petting the wee dog. Leo’s his name, I’m thinking?”

The heat sweeping Hardwick chilled at once.

His racing pulse slowed.

“That I ken,” he lied, glancing back at her.

She was sitting now. A vision on one of the tartan rugs, her legs crossed, as she rubbed the belly of the squirming, waggy little dog.

“Ach, to be sure you did.” Bran pushed to his feet, mirth all over him.

Hardwick stood frozen. Embarrassment flooded him as never

before.

How could he have missed the wee beastie?

"I didn't see the dog right away either," Bran said, making Hardwick wonder if, unlike him, being a ghost had made his friend a mind reader.

"But" – Bran smoothed his plaid and dusted his sleeve – "having seen your lass's better bits bouncing about like that, I'm of a mind to leave you now."

"She isn't my lass." Hardwick couldn't let that go.

She wasn't his and never could be.

Bran threw back his head and laughed. "Whate'er you say, my friend."

"I say you all speed back to Barra." It was the best the scoundrel would get out of him. "My felicitations to-"

"I'm no' heading to Barra. No' just yet, anyway."

"Then where?"

"Ach, see you…." Bran threw a meaningful glance across the room. "I've a sudden hankering for a big-bosomed, broad-hipped Norse lassie. Your flaxen haired lovely is taken and" – he winked – "truth be told, she isn't plump enough for my taste. So it's Lerwick town for me."

Hardwick's brows lifted. "Shetland?"

"So I said, aye." Grinning broadly, the Hebridean chieftain cut a shapely female form in the air. "Where better to find such a delight?

"Where else, indeed," Hardwick agreed, some annoyingly sentimental part of him wishing his friend would stay.

He glanced out the window again, not at all pleased with the day.

Something told him there truly was trouble brewing at Dunroamin and he had a feeling he'd soon find himself in the thick of it.

Especially since Cilla's arrival.

If Vikings really were rampaging across Mac MacGhee's peat fields at night, they might just seize the lass if they caught sight of her.

Norsemen were notorious wenchers.

Even if he'd once borne that title himself, he was also known for his chivalry.

A credo that wouldn't allow him to stand idle and watch harm come to Cilla.

Or anyone else at Dunroamin.

He'd grown fond of the lot of them.

Just as he felt a companionable affection for Bran of Barra and wouldn't mind him at his side if such a need arose.

But when he turned to tell him so, his friend was gone.

Only the faint warmth of his smile remained. The fast-fading echo of his laughter. Then those remnants vanished, as well, leaving Hardwick alone.

Luckily – or perhaps not – Bran also left him with a plan.

Claiming the spot Bran had vacated on the window seat, Hardwick settled his shield across his knees and started to think.

There was, after all, much to consider.

Not that it mattered. Bran's blather about Shetland and the upsetting discourse still going on across the library gave him little choice but to prepare.

Frowning, he snatched an ale cup of his own from the air.

He drained it in one gulp.

What he meant to do wasn't exactly how he'd planned to spend his time here.

But laying in wait for marauding Norsemen was a good deal better than moping about waiting for Cilla to tempt him again.

A good deal better, indeed.

Chapter Five

Several hours, a haggis-stuffed chicken breast, and way too many cups of tea later, Cilla stood in the middle of her room's spacious, splendidly appointed bathroom and took back everything she'd thought earlier about the lavish amenities being all twenty-first century.

The claw-foot bathtub hailed from the Dark Ages.

The shower was demonic.

Most annoying of all, she'd stubbed her toe when she'd spent at least ten minutes stumbling about, trying to figure out how to turn on the bathroom lights.

Her toe still hurt.

She might even have broken it.

Refusing to acknowledge the pain pulsing up her leg, she gritted her teeth and clutched the edge of the fancy marble sink.

Soon, the hot throbbing would lessen.

She hoped.

"Geez Louise, Uncle Mac…." She tightened her grip on the sink and flashed a glare at the culprit, the oh-so-innocuous main power switch.

Who would've thought it'd be hidden inside an innocent-looking Victorian vanity?

Honoria, at least, could have warned her.

Certainly Aunt Birdie.

She knew American bathrooms. Even ones in cheapo apartment complexes like Cilla's Colonial Arms in Yardley boasted bathrooms that worked.

Especially the lights.

She frowned and allowed herself a tiny whimper.

Her toe *did* hurt.

Her scowl deepened. She'd known Scots prided themselves on being thrifty. It was a talent she certainly wouldn't argue with, given her own dire financial straits. But was it really necessary to have a secret power switch to flick in order to make the light panel work?

Worse yet, to then hide that all-important lever in a place no one would dream to look?

It was almost too much to fathom.

Now that she had light, she couldn't get the shower to work right.

It, too, appeared to be controlled by a box.

No such thing as just turning it on and stepping into the too-

tall claw-foot tub, pulling the curtain tight, and enjoying a cascade of steamy, pounding water.

Oh, no.

First you had to fiddle with a maze of buttons and switches that apparently heated and regulated a stream of water best described as a trickle or a blast, with nothing whatsoever between.

And – heaven help her – the temperature choices were only two: scalding hot or iceberg cold.

Cilla gritted her teeth and glared at the icy droplets dripping from the shower head.

She turned the knob a fraction of a hair's breadth and nearly scorched herself on the geyser-like rush of boiling water that burst forth to scald her.

"Owwww!" She leapt back, shaking her arm against the stinging heat and slamming her hip into the protruding edge of the hard marbled sink.

She glared at the shower, not at all surprised when it dwindled to nothing again. She didn't have to thrust her hand under the dribbles to know they'd be frigid.

"Sheesh." Shaking her head, she rubbed her hip. It pulsed in time with the throbbing in her toe.

If this was Scotland, she wanted nothing to do with the place.

A daily shower was a necessity, after all.

Determined to have hers, she threw down the towel she'd wrapped around herself and climbed into the slippery high-sided tub.

Surely, she'd been doing something wrong.

But the instant she touched the shower dial and it made a weird spluttering, hissing noise, she knew better than to try her luck.

It took her all of two seconds to wrench the dial back to the off position and scramble out of the tub before disaster struck.

Her mood now ruined, she yanked a fresh towel off the pleasantly warmed towel bar – thankful for that small luxury – and opted for a cat bath at the sink.

Unfortunately, the two sink faucets proved as diabolical as the shower. While the one marked cold dutifully produced an adequate stream of clear, chilly water, a steaming torrent shot out of the other.

Before she could jump away, the hot water hit the sides of the sink and splashed back up to spray her with a shower of scalding mist.

"Aaaggghhhh!" She flung up her arms, sending the towel sailing. Her feet slid out from under her on the slick tiles of the wet floor.

"Oh, no!" she cried, catching a glimpse of *him* in the mirror just as she was about to slam into the edge of the tall, iron tub.

"Och, aye." Strong hands seized her, hefting her in the air only

to plunk her back onto her feet. But not before she'd felt the warm curve of his hands near her breasts, the tips of his fingers brushing her skin.

She raised her own hands, splaying them across her nakedness. His sandalwood scent filled the bathroom, swirling around her and tingeing each indrawn breath. She shivered, unable to move. Real or not, he looked rock-solid. He towered over her, his stare so heated the air between them seemed to catch fire.

Cilla knew women back home who'd kill to have such a gorgeous Highlander look at them so hotly. They'd see his otherworldliness as secondary to his nationality and burr. Of no consequence at all, she was sure.

They'd just want a piece of him.

She swallowed, her heart thundering.

He let his gaze dip to her breasts and lower, his slow, intense perusal scorching her in a much more dangerous way than the scalding shower.

"You!" She stared at him, every wicked, brazen thought she'd had about him in a bed of heather whooshing back to make her cheeks burn.

Knowing they must be glowing, she stiffened. "How dare you appear here, in my-"

"Ach, lass. You'd be surprised at what I'd dare." He leaned close, his deep voice soft against her ear. "There isn't aught I-"

A weird gurgling came from the shower. High-pitched and screechy. She would've mistaken it for the teeter of a sniggering old woman if she hadn't known of the bathroom's peculiarities.

Sir Hotness shot a glance at the curtained bathtub, his brows snapping together. "I appear where and when it suits me. Be glad it was me here to save you, again."

Cilla's eyes widened. "Are you saying there are other ghosts who could have?"

"There are aye discarnates about, everywhere." He looked at her, his gaze locking on hers. His mouth compressed into a tight, hard line as he folded his arms, unwilling to say more.

Cilla bit her lip, not liking the implication. Nor could she deny that he'd come to her aid not once, but twice. Or that, all things considered, he was the embodiment of her deepest, most heated fantasies, and that if she needed rescuing she'd much rather have him appear than whatever was putting such a frown on his face.

Even so…

She raised her chin. "You could have cracked my ribs, grabbing me as you did."

"I warned you I'd no' be gentle a second time."

"You shouldn't be here at all."

His face darkened even more. "Had I known you'd be unclothed, I wouldn't be."

"People don't usually stay dressed to take a shower." She grabbed a towel, whipping it around her. "Do you?"

"I-" He turned a disdainful glance on the claw-foot tub and its wacky boiler. "I can think of better ways to keep clean."

Cilla curled her fingers into the towel, clutching it to her breasts. "Such as?"

He jerked his head toward the doorway into her bedroom, where large wooden tub stood in the shadows.

A tub that hadn't been there when she'd entered the bathroom.

Lined with what appeared to be a length of fine medieval-y white linen, the tub brimmed with steaming rose-scented water she suspected would prove bath-oil smooth and just the right temperature.

If the tub were real.

Which, of course, it wasn't.

She frowned and decided to pretend she didn't see it.

His gaze went again to the pesky boiler contraption on the bathroom wall. "Aye, much better," he declared in that silky-deep burr. "My style of bathing is more reliable."

He stood proud, looking sure of it.

She couldn't forget that she was almost naked. Her towel didn't hide much. Something told her Scots tried to save on toweling cloth along with electricity and hot water. The way this Scot slid his dark gaze over her, lingering especially on the swells of her breasts and the curve of her hips, revealed that he thoroughly approved of that thriftiness. At least regarding the size of bath towels.

Never had a man looked at her with such burning hunger in his eyes.

Or set off such a hot tingling between her legs with nothing more than a glance.

She was as bad as every Scotland-loving, crazy-about-Highlanders, kilt-chasing female back home. Just being close to so much exquisite Scottish maleness was making it hard for her to breathe. Awareness prickled across her skin and her pulse hitched, quickening. She couldn't deny that he excited her.

She swallowed, sure he knew.

"Do you mind?" Her face flaming, she tugged the towel higher up her breasts. "Mister…"

"Sir," he corrected, his sensual lips curving oh so slightly. "Sir Hardwin de Studley of Seagrave."

"De *what*?" Cilla's jaw slipped. She resisted the urge to poke her fingers in her ears and wriggle them.

She couldn't have heard correctly.

Either that or she'd eaten too much of the haggis filling in her chicken ecosse.

"Tell me again." She eyed him, sure it was the haggis. "Who did you say you are?"

"Sir Hardwin de Studley," he repeated, his deep burr rolling. "'Tis a good Norman Scots name. You won't hear it much nowadays."

"I wouldn't think so."

His smile turned wicked, as if he hoped to unsettle her. "Friends call me Hardwick."

That's even worse! Cilla almost blurted, but before she could, he flicked a finger at the wooden tub and it disappeared, his little sleight of ghostly hand making the words lodge in her throat.

"Since you chose no' to avail yourself of it." Sounding as if that were a great shame, he leaned back against the doorjamb, his long legs crossed at the ankles.

Cilla stared at him.

He looked much too comfortable lounging so casually in her bathroom doorway.

She couldn't let him stay there.

Especially not when he continued his tricks, this time making a quick flipping motion with his wrist, and his shield appeared in his hand. Holding it loosely at his side, he gave her another smile, this time an even darker, more dangerous one.

A curl-a-girl's-toes kind of smile she knew better than to let get to her.

He was all smoke and mirrors.

Walking temptation, and she wasn't even going to think about how his mere presence excited her.

His accent alone could stir a woman to climax.

She'd been hovering on the edge of one ever since his fingers had slid across her breasts. Heaven help her if those long, skilled-looking fingers came anywhere near more sensitive areas. Ripples of sensation already poured through her, electric and powerful. She'd almost believe he exuded some kind of irresistible panty-melting force field. She did know he was much too gorgeous and virile.

Worst of all, he was way too Scottish.

Highlanders were irresistible to women.

This one was a greater threat than most because he wasn't real, however strong her awareness of him. She'd gone off men and she wasn't about to fall for a ghost.

"Look here, Sir Hard-whoever-you-are, I've already told you that your shield trick doesn't impress me." She tossed her hair behind her shoulder. "As for beaming yourself in here when I'm trying to

shower, that's just rude."

"Rude?" Hardwick blinked, the fire in her eyes spearing him.

It wasn't the kind of heat he was accustomed to stirring in women.

Annoyed, he pushed away from the door and drew himself to his full height. "You, lass, have no idea what it cost me to be here."

"Then why are you?"

"No' to see you naked." The words escaped before he could stop them.

"Oh!" Her cheeks bloomed red. "I don't believe this!" she cried, scooting past him out the bathroom door.

Hardwick scowled after her.

Good, if he'd vexed her into leaving.

That was his aim, after all.

Unfortunately, he hadn't meant to do it thusly. Watching her dart across the polished – slippery - floor, grab a robe off the bed and don it in all haste didn't feel like the triumph it should.

It felt rather lousy.

Never had he seen a lass dress so swiftly. And rarely had he felt such an urge to bite off his tongue. He'd burned to see more of her nakedness. Ever since glimpsing her full, round breasts the possibility had consumed him, unwise as such yearnings were. Most disturbing of all, he could see them bare-arsed and sweaty, rolling in the heather, their lust unquenchable.

He could imagine the taste of her.

And he wanted it on the back of his tongue.

He pulled a hand down over his chin, furious with himself and his plight.

The urges he had no business feeling.

"You misheard me." He spoke to her back, trying to keep his gaze from straying down to the sweet curves of her hips, the lush rounds of her buttocks. He could so easily cup them, squeeze her ripe, plump flesh and then drop to his knees, licking his way to her most tender parts, a delicacy he'd savor. More than that, he'd use all his skills to melt her, not having done until he'd given her the most intense, primal release she'd ever known.

Instead, he pushed the images from his mind and sought words to soothe her agitation. "For truth, lass, I meant seeing you unclothed is the last thing-"

"So you're not only rude, but insulting!" She whirled on him, her blue eyes ablaze.

"Holy heather!" He jammed his hands on his hips and stared at her. "You still dinnae-"

"I understand perfectly well." She yanked on the ends of her robe's belt, making a knot. "I'll ask you again. Why did you appear in my bathroom?"

"Because I heard you scream."

Her eyes rounded. "You were listening at my door?"

Nae, I was guarding it.

The true answer hung unspoken between them. She needn't know he was troubled by certain goings-on at Dunroamin and meant to look into them.

Or that he hoped doing so would help him to keep his mind off of her.

His mouth twitched on that impossibility.

The great silvery Kyle would sooner dry up and all the noble peaks of the north slip back into the earth before he could stop desiring her.

She'd bespelled him, working a stronger magick than that wart-nosed, bent-backed bard of old could have done in his wildest conjuring dreams.

Watching her, he almost laughed at his predicament and would have if he didn't wish to upset her even more. Seeing her naked had nearly undone him. Feeling her sleek warm skin, all smooth and wet beneath his hands when he'd caught her, was a torture he couldn't risk again.

If he'd held her a moment longer, even the Dark One's threats wouldn't have mattered.

As it was, he'd almost nipped and nuzzled her neck when he'd bent to whisper in her ear. He'd even considered slipping a hand between her legs and using one expertly circling finger to show her the kind of bliss a man could give a woman after seven hundred years of experience.

An urge that was surely responsible for causing one of the hell hags to gurgle a laugh from the shower. In the same moment, he caught a whiff of root dragon's breath, its foulness chilling his blood.

He blinked against the lingering steam, certain the Dark One's hags and dragons wouldn't sneak so openly into this earthly realm. Yet he swore he saw sharp nails and the flash of a scaly tail.

He shuddered, turning back to Cilla when the image faded.

Even now she tempted him.

Damp, disheveled, and wearing a Dunroamin plaid robe with her name stitched across the breast in ridiculously large letters, she stirred him more than any other lass he'd ever known.

Having seen her naked was a gift.

And a worse burden than the curse that had plagued him for so many centuries.

"So?" She was still staring at him, her gaze intent. "Were you eavesdropping or not?"

He frowned. "I have ne'er done the like in my life. Or thereafter."

"Oh, that's right." She swept her hair behind an ear. "Let's not forget you're a ghost."

The words ripped him. "Would that I could."

She narrowed her eyes. "I'd rather hear what you were doing outside my door?"

Hardwick considered how much he should tell her.

"Two lads carried coffers up here earlier and I followed them." That was certainly true enough. He just didn't mention he hadn't liked the looks of them.

Tall, red-haired, and strapping, they'd struck him as too young, too bonnie, and – most damning of all – too alive.

"Coffers?" She'd come closer, her blue eyes rounding.

Hardwick blinked, the youths forgotten.

"Aye, coffers." He glanced to where the strongboxes stood near the shuttered windows. "They looked heavy and-"

"Those aren't coffers."

He eyed them carefully, certain they were.

To his surprise, she laughed.

Not a mocking sort of laugh, but a light and breezy kind that slid through him with ease, warming him in ways that were more than dangerous.

"Those are packing crates full of chipped and cracked porcelain." She went to stand beside them. "Uncle Mac never throws out anything, and he said I could have them. The boys you saw are Roddie and Robbie, Honoria's nephews. Aunt Cilla mentioned they do odd jobs around the estate. They brought the crates down from the attic."

Hardwick's brows drew together. He considered himself most enlightened to the ways of her world, but he'd never heard of packing crates.

Nor had he suspected that Mac MacGhee's fortunes had turned so poorly that he'd be forced to give his visiting niece damaged goods as a welcome gift.

The very notion made his heart sore.

"They're beauties." She'd opened the lid of one of the coffers – he refused to think of them as anything else – and withdrew a small flowered cup, lovely save the jagged crack in its side and a rather conspicuous chip at the gold-edged rim. "I've rarely seen such treasures."

She held up the cream-colored cup for his inspection.

"Humph." Hardwick found himself at a loss for a suitable comment.

Instead, he stepped closer and examined the cup.

Decorated with pink roses surrounded by smaller flowers in purple, yellow, and blue, the design was enhanced with a scattering of delicate green leaves. The cup would have been a treasure indeed if not so sadly marred.

Surprisingly, she didn't appear at all disheartened by the cup's flaws, which said a great deal about her character. She clearly didn't wish to offend her aunt and uncle by seeming disappointed in their gift.

Hardwick frowned. He didn't like the direction his mind was taking.

It served him better when she sparred with him, spearing him with her fiery blue gaze.

For one thing, he now knew beyond doubt that a henwife couldn't claim a hand in the color of her honey-gold hair. She was born to the lovely shade. That knowledge alone could have dire repercussions if he allowed himself to dwell on how he'd made such a delicious discovery.

It was one thing to imagine a sweet triangle of golden curls topping her thighs, all soft and inviting.

And something else entirely to have seen such sweetness.

Nor had he yet recovered from the pleasant ring of her laughter. How it'd warmed him. Learning she possessed a caring heart along with her fine curves and other charms was more than he wished to know.

"Here's another." She plucked a small flowered plate from deep inside the coffer's straw-like filling. "Who would have thought Uncle Mac's attic would hold such gems?"

"No' I, to be sure." Hardwick tightened his grip on his shield.

Then, because her delight in the pathetic wares apparently overrode her objections to him, he peered dutifully at the plate when she held it in his direction.

Covered with pink and deep-red roses, again with a few artfully placed green leaves and gold trim, this piece, too, had seen better days. A jagged crack zig-zagged across its center, marring its onetime perfection.

She didn't seem to see the defect.

Far from it, she beamed at the dish, her excitement clearly mounting when she turned it over and studied its underside.

"English." She ran a finger along the crack, pausing over a line of squiggly black lettering. "Early 1900s, I'm guessing."

Hardwick's gut clenched.

She sounded overjoyed that the plate was not only damaged but, considering her time, quite ancient.

"Uncle Mac isn't the only one in the family who loves old things," she mused, her eyes misty. "This" – she hugged the cracked dish to her heart – "is just what I needed."

"Nae, it isn't. No' at all." Hardwick couldn't help the denial. Every chivalrous bone in him railed against seeing her so soppy-headed over such shameful offerings.

Equally painful was imagining Mac MaGhee's reaction.

A proud man, the laird surely knew his niece deserved better.

Unable to stop himself now that he'd spoken, Hardwick indicated the two coffers with a flick of his hand. "More's the pity your uncle couldn't give you something finer as a welcome gift." He hoped his voice held more sympathy than disapproval. "A maid like yourself ought be welcomed with ropes of shining pearls and glittering gemstones, no' cracked and chipped bits of cast-off cups and-"

She laughed.

A beautiful golden sound, rich and honey-edged, but damning in its portent.

Somehow – and he didn't know where – he'd erred.

Just as embarrassing, he'd blethered on like a lovesick calf.

Ropes of pearl and glittering gemstones!

If Bran had heard him utter the like, he'd be the laughing stock of ghostdom and beyond.

He frowned, already willing himself elsewhere.

Perhaps Mac MacGhee's armory, where he could claim a chair and let scores of targes glower down at him, each one reminding him of his plight and how he'd best hold his tongue – and his lust – around the laird's fetching niece.

Or maybe he'd sift himself out to MacGhee's peat banks and watch for Viking ghosts.

That, after all, had been his plan before he'd spotted the two red-headed giants, Roddie and Robbie, lugging the coffers abovestairs.

Coffers that had somehow managed to make him look the fool again.

He bristled.

It was a mistake he wouldn't make a second time.

"Broken china is my passion." Her words came to him from as if from afar.

He watched her return the plate to the coffer, now seeing her and her chipped treasures through the mist beginning to whirl around him. She didn't notice as the grayness swirled faster, almost cloaking him. He could have – should have - simply vanished. Leaving in the mist took longer. But despite his embarrassment, he wanted to savor

those last lingering moments to admire how her hair, so glossy and bright, spilled across her face as she bent over her prizes.

His heart squeezed, and he damned his curse.

How he'd love to see those fair tresses spread across her pillow, twine his fingers in the silken strands as he settled himself above her, kissing her…

Trailing an openmouthed blaze of fire down her naked skin to dip a questing tongue into the slick, sweet heat he knew waited between her thighs.

He groaned, knowing she'd no longer hear him.

Clenching his fists, he drew a tight, uneven breath and willed the mist to spin faster. Once, something hot, dry and clawlike, snatched at his ankle, but he jerked free, keeping his gaze on her.

Then the gloom claimed him and he could see and hear her no more.

"The broken china is my work," Cilla said, still rummaging in the coffer's straw. "I make jewelry from antique porcelain." She picked up a crescent-shaped shard of rich blues, appearing to admire it. Necklaces, earrings, bracelets, rings, you name it. I even do some wall art, mirrors and stained glass pieces and such. That's why Uncle Mac gave the boxes to me. Not as a welcome gift."

She made a sweeping gesture, taking in the paneled bedroom with its clutter of Victorian gothic furnishings. "I didn't need a welcome present from Uncle Mac. Being here is gift enough," she added, not mentioning how she'd dreamt of coming to Scotland all her life.

How she hoped her time at Dunroamin would fill the emptiness inside her. And not the void left by Grant A. Hughes III. Since Hardwick's arrival in her life, she could hardly even picture Grant's face. But she hadn't designed a thing – not even a beaded hairpin – in weeks.

That frightened her.

Her creative well was dry.

"Oh, yes." She swallowed against the tightness in her throat. "Being here is exactly what I needed."

Humph.

The snort sounded muffled, almost more like the wind soughing past the window shutters than Hardwick's buttery rich burr.

"In return" - she tucked the bit of Delft china back into the crate - "I've agreed to teach Dunroamin's residents how to make broken china jewelry. Aunt Cilla and Uncle Mac hope that if they have something creative to keep them busy, they won't think so much about the Viking ghosts-"

She broke off and clapped a hand over her mouth.

Heat flamed her face.

Who was she to make light of old folks thinking they saw Viking ghosts running across the moors at night when she was standing in the middle of her bedroom having a conversation with one?

"Oh, man." What she needed to do was tell him to stop materializing everywhere she went. If that was what his sudden appearances out of thin air were called.

She didn't want to be haunted.

If she was imagining him, she wanted to stop that, too.

It couldn't be good for her.

But when she turned around to tell him so, he was gone.

Her jaw started to slip but she didn't let it. Instead, she put on her best I-am-in-charge look and made a careful circuit of the room, turning on mock Victorian oil lamps as she went. One by one, they cast little pools of softly glowing light, but not near enough to chase the shadows from every empty space and corner.

She paused near the hearth, glad for its cheery birch-and-peat fire.

Much better to continue her survey of the room from here, in the warmth and light of the fire, than to keep stalking about with her every footstep echoing off the polished wood floor.

Each *tap-tappity-tap* gave her the willies, making her think someone was sneaking along behind her.

Frowning, she considered just going to bed and pulling the covers over her head.

But her bed – great, dark-wooded four-poster that it was, complete with heavy, embroidered hangings – seemed to hunch in wait for her. As did the other, equally clunky furnishings, each piece appearing to hold its breath in the silence, watching to see what she'd do.

She shivered and rubbed her arms.

"I am not on the set of a bad horror film." She spoke the words slowly, distinctly. "There's nothing anymore odd about the shadows in this room than the ones in my apartment back in Yardley."

The room was just a little heavy on the gothic.

It was simply Dunroamin.

Her echoing footsteps had been just that – footsteps. The few creaks and groans breaking the stillness were only the sounds of ancient woodwork settling down for the night. All old houses made such noises.

All antique dresser mirrors had ghosts in them.

"Gah!" She jumped.

The ghostly woman leapt closer to the mirror glass and gaped at her. Pale, wild-eyed, and with a tangled mane of hair, the specter shook her head and began withdrawing into the mirror's depths. Each retreating step took her deeper into the shadows until she stopped cold, frozen in place, the very moment Cilla backed into an enormous overstuffed chair.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" She threw her hands up, laughing when the *ghost* did the same.

Regrettably, the image also revealed her shell-shocked appearance.

What she needed was fresh air.

She gave herself a little shake to settle her nerves and then marched across the room and opened the nearest window. She unlatched the shutters, deliberately ignoring the weird screech of the rusty hinges.

Such things wouldn't bother her again.

She had the backbone to stand above them.

For the moment, she'd simply enjoy the view. There really was a lot to relish. If one appreciated mist and drizzle, a touch of brisk chill air, all of which she did.

Clutching the edges of the window, she breathed deep.

Never had she seen a place of such haunting beauty, though *haunting* wasn't the best word choice at the moment. Even so, it suited. She took another long breath, inhaling air scented with the rich earthiness of peat, a tinge of rain and damp, ageless stone. Her cares began to roll off her shoulders.

She'd always understood why Aunt Birdie had fallen for a Highlander.

Now, finally, she saw why her aunt had also lost her heart to Scotland's far north. Wild, empty, and heart-piercingly beautiful, the vista before her was so spectacular it almost hurt to gaze upon.

But she did, letting her troubles melt away as she stared down at the liquid glass surface of the Kyle, silver blue and gleaming. She leaned out the window to better watch the moon rise above what looked to be a ruined tower perched on the edge of one of the cliffs on the far side of the inlet. Rising like two fingers held up in the victory sign, the ruin appeared to have a window arch in one of its remaining walls.

How old it must be!

Certainly older than Dunroamin.

She shivered. This time with excitement. Who would have thought her room would look out upon an ancient castle ruin? There could be no mistaking that it was a crumbled tower. Even at this late hour, the sky shimmered with a luminosity that let her see everything.

She saw not just the lines of the distant ruin, but also the great mass of Ben Loyal, bluish-purple in the night's clear, limpid light, and - if she squinted – the one-track thread of a road, impossibly narrow and mist-sheened, that curved around the long sea loch that was the Kyle of Tongue. She could even see – if she craned her neck - a sliver of the rolling moorlands where Uncle Mac cut his peat.

Fine peat, the best in the north. Or so he claimed.

Looking that way now, she blinked, then gasped, her eyes widening.

The *devil* filled her vision.

Huge, red, and wickedly horned, his leering face hovered in the air just outside the window.

"Eeeeee!" She grabbed the shutters and yanked them into place.

The window wouldn't budge.

"Come on!" She pulled but nothing happened. "Shut, will you?"

When she broke a fingernail, she got mad.

She glared at her torn nail. The back of her neck caught fire. "Enough," she seethed, her smarting cuticle pushing her over the edge.

Could it be her kiltie? Would he reappear so quickly, disguised as the devil to scare her?

She knew in her heart he wouldn't.

The red devil face had to be someone else.

Something else.

Whatever it was, she wouldn't show any fear. No matter that her knees were knocking, she wouldn't be from anywhere close to Philadelphia if she didn't know how to look brave.

But in the instant it took her to throw open the shutters to prove it, the hovering devil had vanished.

Without leaving so much as a pitch fork or a puff of brimstone in his wake.

"Whew." She let out a shaky breath.

Then she curled her fingers around the cold, wet iron of the shutter latches, her gaze once again on the tower ruin across the Kyle. Wrapped round with a veil of thin, whirling mist, its stones called her.

But not near as much as Hardwick did.

And that scared her more than floating devil faces.

Much more.

Chapter Six

Early the next day, Cilla stood at the entrance to Dunroamin's breakfast room - actually a conservatory overlooking the paved terrace and garden lawn - and decided bright morning sunshine went a long way in dispelling the castle's air of gothic gloom.

Easier to find than the library, she'd only needed to follow the delicious aroma of bacon and the clatter of dishes and cutlery to reach the airy, glass-walled room.

And, of course, the raised tone of Colonel Darling's clipped English voice.

She'd heard him the minute she neared the bottom of the main stairs. Now, as she hurried to join her aunt at a small corner table, his bellowing proved even louder.

She turned a questioning look on her aunt. "What's with him?"

"It's a morning ritual." Aunt Birdie appeared unconcerned. "After all these years, I can't imagine breakfast without their sparring. It keeps things lively."

Cilla leaned forward to peer around a potted coffee bean tree at the elderly combatants. She wasn't sure such bickering should count as liveliness, especially not so early in the day. But she kept the thought to herself.

More importantly, Hardwick didn't seem present.

Not kilted. Not invisible. Nor in his latest – and ridiculous - red devil get-up.

She frowned, feeling a twinge of guilt for suspecting him again. But after hours spent tossing and turning, and especially in the bright light of morning, the notion of the devil at Dunroamin struck her as absurd.

Ghosts she could handle.

She already knew one was here.

And much as she felt herself attracted to him, however crazy that might be, it was obvious he wanted her gone. So maybe he had made himself look like the devil? It was a safe enough bet that most women would run for hills after such a fright.

It was his tough luck that she wasn't every woman.

Still…

She worried her lower lip and glanced around, expecting to see him. But she couldn't sense him anywhere in the sunny room. Filled with light and a touch of Aunt Birdie's bohemian charm, the conservatory felt totally ghostless with its crowding of exotic

greenery, crisp blue table linens, and windowed walls of sparkling glass.

Even so, she glanced at an oak sideboard near the door. Massive and stacked with china, pitchers of juice, and colorful serving bowls of muesli, the dresser cast the room's only shadows.

Satisfied that those wedges of darkness held nothing more than a standing rack of weekly papers, she returned her attention to her breakfast.

Her first full Scottish breakfast, as a tartan-edged hand-printed card declared in large, bold letters. She'd heard about the heartiness of such feasts. The meal was a treat she meant to enjoy without worrying about spooks.

Or the arguing residents.

Determined to put them all from her mind, she picked up the menu and read the selection.

Fresh fruit salad or fruit slices.

Any style eggs, bacon and sausage, black pudding and haggis, smoked haddock or salmon. Fried tattie scones, soda farls – *whatever they were* – mushrooms, baked beans, and toast, white or dark.

Muesli, yogurt, and porridge.

Tea or coffee.

Juices.

Cilla's mouth watered. Her stomach made an embarrassing noise. Fried potato scones sounded like her idea of heaven, though she might pass on the black pudding. Everyone knew it was really blood sausage. Still, she was hungry enough to have a bit of everything. Maybe even one of the mysterious sounding soda farls.

First she needed caffeine.

She was not a morning person.

Knowing it, Aunt Birdie indicated the teapot. The silver bangles on her arm tinkled as she tapped the pot's handle. "You can have coffee if you prefer?"

Cilla shook her head.

She'd love coffee, but the tea was on the table. Readily accessible caffeine was the best caffeine.

"Where's Uncle Mac?" She poured a cup of the tea. "Is he sleeping late?"

"Your uncle?" Aunt Birdie nearly choked on a piece of smoked haddock. "He was up and away before the sun. It's him that they're all fussing about this morning."

"Uncle Mac?"

Aunt Birdie nodded, her gaze flicking to the agitated colonel.

"Bollocks!" Seated at the head of a large antique pine table, he waved a speared sausage. "He'll not find anything but bog cotton and muck on his wellies! You didn't hear him saying he was going off to look for Vikings, did you?"

Across the table from him, Violet Manyweathers sniffed. "Of course, he didn't say the like. He doesn't want to alarm us unduly."

"You've gone full daft." The colonel popped the sausage into his mouth and chewed angrily.

"The laird never goes out so early," Flora Duthie chimed, tucking a napkin into her collar. "Not before his breakfast. We all know that."

As unobtrusively as she could, Cilla parted the glossy dark green leaves of the coffee bean tree and sneaked a look at the other table.

The only one occupied besides hers and Aunt Birdie's.

"Mac MacGhee's business is just that – his business." Colonel Darling forked another sausage. "He won't appreciate a gaggle of old biddies speculating on how he chooses to fill his morning."

Flora ignored the insult. "The Vikings were especially active last night," she said, adding a pinch of salt to her porridge. "Like as not he saw them, too, and hoped to catch any that might still be floating about."

"Might still be floatin' aboot!" Red-faced, the colonel mimicked the tiny woman's burr. "The only thing floating about this place is that insufferable boxtie."

He yanked his tweed cap more snugly onto his head and shot an angry look at Violet. "That abominable bird of yours is the real spook. Mark my words."

Her expression infinitely calm, Violet spooned a helping of haggis onto her plate. "Gregor is a bonxie, not a boxtie. And" – she returned the serving spoon to the dish of haggis – "who the spook around here is, is a matter of opinion."

Flora teetered.

Colonel Darling reached for his tea, nearly dropping the cup when Leo shot out from under the table and leapt up to snatch the napkin off his lap.

"Damnation!" He half rose from his chair, shaking a fist at the retreating dachshund. "Long-backed little bugger! I'll get my hands on him one of these days!" he roared, dropping back onto his seat. "Him, and that wretched boxtie."

"Great skua, affectionately known as a bonxie." Honoria waltzed into the room bearing a platter heaped with crispy bacon, black pudding, and steaming scrambled eggs.

"Affectionately!" The colonel glared at her.

Looking pleased to have corrected him, the housekeeper plunked her tray onto a large oak buffet near his table. "You'll not be touching either creature or you'll have to contend with me."

"Bah!" He grabbed a piece of toast and started smearing it with butter. "Bring me another napkin or you'll have me to deal with."

"I'm trembling in my shoes." The housekeeper's lips twitched as she did as he bid, even spreading the napkin on his lap for him.

"Harrumph." He nodded gruff thanks and returned to his toast.

Cilla released her grip on the coffee bean tree leaves and turned back to the table. Through the windows she caught a swift movement out on the lawn, near the sundial. Her heart leapt, then dipped when she spotted two rabbits playing chase in the grass.

She'd thought it'd been him.

Her kiltie.

Despite his antics – if he was indeed behind the red devil face - some crazy-mad part of her wanted to see him again.

But nothing moved on the emerald green lawn except sun shadows, the rabbits, and a sparrow that seemed intent on pecking at something on the stone face of the sundial.

"Honoria!"

Cilla started. The colonel's bark brought her back inside the conservatory.

"Cook forgot to serve Flora's porridge in her wooden bowl." He held up the silver porringer as evidence. "Porridge cools too quickly in this contraption, fancy as it is."

Cilla watched as the housekeeper took the silver bowl without a twitch of irritation.

Holding the porridge before her, she started for the door. "I'll fetch another serving and make sure we use Flora's special bowl."

The colonel nodded, clearly appeased.

Flora gave him a twittery smile.

"See?" Aunt Birdie reached across the table to nudge Cilla's arm. "The bickering between them is pure stuff and nonsense. They're all actually quite fond of each other. I suspect that's a reason they've stayed with us when others have left."

"Did the others really leave because of Viking ghosts?"

Aunt Birdie shrugged.

"That's what they said, yes." She lowered her voice. "See, my dear, with the exception of those like your uncle and Achilles - that's Colonel Darling - many people hereabouts still believe in the old folklore and traditions."

"I know." Cilla smoothed her napkin into place. "I remember

you saying so when you'd visit Yardley."

"It's still true." Aunt Birdie brushed at her skirt. "Seers and second sight, healing rituals and sacred places are all things that are still widely accepted. And" – she glanced out at the sun-bright morning – "not just in gathering twilight or on long winter nights."

"Then you'd think the notion of ghosts wouldn't bother them." Cilla slid another look at the sundial. The rabbits and the little sparrow were gone. "Why-"

"Because along with the harmless and good, like believing a branch of rowan tacked above the byre door will safeguard the health of the animals within, there are other, darker beliefs as well."

"Such as?"

Aunt Birdie looked at her, her face as sincere and earnest as ever. "Omens and taboos that can be quite frightening. The evil eye and the powers of good wives whose magick is anything but."

"Even today?" Cilla had trouble believing it. "People really worry about those things?"

"Don't forget you're in Scotland, dear." Aunt Birdie topped off her teacup. "Sutherland, remote and rugged as it is, is Highland Scotland at its best and its worst, depending on your viewpoint."

Visions of the red devil face rose in Cilla's mind and she opened her mouth to say so, but closed it as quickly. Aunt Birdie and her uncle had enough on their plates without her adding hovering devils to the brew.

She cleared her throat, pushing the image aside. "So the residents who left really were afraid of Viking ghosts?"

"Indeed they were, sadly." A tiny crease appeared between Aunt Birdie's brows. "One woman confided she feared the Norsemen were harbingers of doom. That they'd come to get her in her sleep. Sort of like the tales down south of those huge phantom dogs said to slink about the moors at night. To see one of the great black beasts meant certain death."

Cilla shivered. "I'm sorry. I wish-"

"Things will improve. Our stalwarts are still here and soon others will join us. I'm sure of it." Aunt Birdie flashed a smile and reached for a basket of what looked to be very large and thick scones.

"Have a soda farl." She jiggled the basket. "Cook really has a way with them." She cast a look at the colonel and his buttered toast. "They're much better than toast. Like the English, the Scots never seem able to serve anything but cold toast."

"What about you?" Cilla took one of the soda farls. "Do you think there are Viking ghosts?"

"You know I believe in ghosts." Aunt Birdie set down the basket, her arm bangles jingling again. "I'm sure there are plenty

Viking ones all up and down Scotland's coasts. But I've yet to sense any here."

"What about the chivalrous ghost you said was angry at Grant for ditching me?" Cilla's heart skittered on the words. "Is he still here?"

She had to ask.

Even though she knew the question put two bright spots of red on her cheeks.

"A ghost angry at Grant?" Aunt Birdie didn't seem to remember.

"That's what you said." Cilla wished she'd never mentioned him. She could still feel his hot gaze raking her. His fingers brushing her breasts and his soft warm breath tickling her neck when he'd leaned close.

"Ahhh, it's coming back to me." Aunt Birdie tilted her head, peering into nowhere. "He was quite dashing if I recall correctly." Her lips curved in a soft smile. "His energy was bold, even rakish. That's all I caught, regrettably. A fleeting impression, no more."

"And now?"

Aunt Birdie's brow creased again. "Hmmm..." She closed her eyes, concentrating. "I can't sense him at all."

"He's gone?"

"He's not here at the moment, no." Her aunt's eyes popped open, clear and focused again. "That doesn't mean he won't return. Many ghosts come and go at Dunroamin, even if your uncle scoffs at the notion. I'm not the only one who notices them. My theory is that they feel at ease here, perhaps because we keep things as they were."

She picked up her teacup and took a sip, watching Cilla over the rim. "To our residents – and us – Dunroamin is a refuge from the stresses of modern life. Why should that change in the afterlife? Why wouldn't such souls seek a slower-paced, edge-of-the-world haven if they appreciated such places in their earthly lives?"

Cilla bit her lip.

Something told her that kiltie had very different reasons for being at Dunroamin.

Reasons she suspected might be dangerous to know.

As was the kilted ghost himself, she was sure.

"Aunt Birdie …" She drew a breath to change the subject. "What did the colonel mean about bog cotton and muck on Uncle Mac's boots? Where is he anyway?"

Her aunt's mouth twitched. "He's there where the colonel so aptly described. Out in the middle of his peat cuttings, but not to look for ghosts. He's helping Honoria's nephews load a lorry with peat."

"Loading peat?" Cilla's eyes widened. "Isn't that backbreaking

work?"

"It is." Aunt Birdie's brow crease returned. "Although this is the first year we haven't had a score of helpers, young Robbie and Roddie are perfectly capable of doing the work on their own. But you know your uncle."

Cilla set down her fork. "He is stubborn."

"That isn't the half of it." Aunt Birdie glanced over to the residents' table, where voices were rising again. "It'd be easier to soften stone by boiling it than to get him to see reason sometimes."

"Why does he need a whole lorry of peat? As close as his moorland is-"

"That bloody bird has a wingspread of five feet!"

Cilla jumped, Colonel Darling's outburst about Gregor cutting her off.

Someone – Violet? – tsk-tsked. "If you'd be nice to him-"

"To a dive-bombing pterodactyl?" The colonel flushed red. "I once heard of a chap who lost the tip of his nose to one of your beloved boxties!"

When he quieted, Cilla turned back to her aunt. "I meant, with Uncle Mac's moorland so close by, can't he just have Robbie and Roddie bring up the peat as needed?"

"We do that with the peat we burn at Dunroamin." Aunt Birdie sipped her tea, immune to the ruckus at the other table. "It's the distillery peat that needs a lorry."

"Distillery peat?"

"That's right." Aunt Birdie looked at her, a touch of pride in her deep blue eyes. "Dunroamin has superior peat, or so your uncle believes. If you didn't know, it's peat smoke that distinguishes Highland whisky. Distilleries use it to dry their barley. All peat has its own distinctive aroma, depending on area. That's what determines a whisky's ultimate flavor. Our Dunroamin peat is prized for the rich, earthy-sweet tang of its smoke and-"

"So Uncle Mac's gone into the distillery business?" Cilla tried to remember.

"No, the peat business." Aunt Birdie refilled their teacups. "He's been trying to sell our peat to a few of the area's smaller distilleries. Simmer Dim and Northern Mist are just two that have shown interest. Their initial orders have been coming in." She set down the teapot, frowning. "Trouble is the local young men who'd agreed to help are refusing to set foot on our moors. We're in danger of losing this avenue of supplemental income."

"Don't tell me the locals are afraid of Viking ghosts, too?"

Cilla stared at her aunt. Shades of Dawn Paterson and her parents whirled across her mind. "Or is there another reason Uncle Mac's

helpers left him in the lurch?"

"That's the million dollar question, my dear." Aunt Birdie sighed. "Sutherland has never been an easy place to make a living. Your uncle suspects someone bribed the young men, luring them away with promises of better paying jobs elsewhere."

Cilla frowned.

That she could believe.

"So it isn't about ghosts?"

"I'd say it's a little bit of both." Aunt Birdie squinted in the bright sun slanting through the windows. "People hereabouts are superstitious. Word spreads quicker than a brushfire. If you sneezed, everyone in Tongue would know it before you reached for a tissue."

"That sounds like Yardley." Cilla couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. "Before I drove home from the Charm Box, everyone along the Eastern Seaboard knew I couldn't sell my jewelry."

"It's a far cry from Yardley." Aunt Birdie was her serene self again. "Who could blame the local lads if they were lured away by better-paying jobs? Many have young families to support. If they backed out because they fear something evil haunts our peat banks, well, that's understandable, too."

"Because this is the wilds of northern Scotland," Cilla borrowed her aunt's earlier words, "and Viking ghosts really might be putting in an appearance."

Aunt Birdie took a sip of tea. "Exactly."

"I still think it's lousy." Cilla sat up straighter. She knew all about how it felt to watch one's livelihood crumble away to nothing.

She swept a hand over her hair, frowning. "It really is rotten, Aunt Birdie. I know you need the money. Honoria told me about the roof and how Uncle Mac-"

"Uncle Mac will do just fine." Aunt Birdie's smile said she believed it. "I've never known a more resourceful man. Even if all our residents leave and no one buys our peat, he'll think of something to keep Dunroamin going."

"I know, but..." Cilla's heart squeezed.

The thought of Aunt Birdie and Uncle Mac losing Dunroamin was unfathomable.

Worse, with Aunt Birdie's sometimes dippy ways and Uncle Mac's penchant for living in the past, she doubted they'd last long living anywhere else.

"Ach! Don't look so glum." Sounding almost as Scottish as Uncle Mac, Aunt Birdie leaned forward. "With the help of Robbie and Roddie, your uncle will get his first load of peat off to Simmer Dim and Northern Mist, Viking ghosties or no. And he has a lot more plans for further-"

"You sound like you really believe in them."

"Viking ghosts?"

Cilla nodded.

"I do." Aunt Birdie's eyes twinkled. "I just haven't sensed any here, as I've told you. But" – her voice dropped – "I have felt them at the ruins of Castle Varrich. You might have seen the ruined tower from your window?"

"The ruin across the Kyle, perched on a cliff edge?" Cilla's interest perked. "I saw it last night. Is it said to be haunted by Vikings?"

"Not that I've ever heard, but I'm certain I sensed a Norsewoman there once." Aunt Birdie's tone turned wistful. "I was there very late one night, well after midnight. You know summer nights here never get truly dark. I saw her for just an instant. She was standing with her back to me, her long blond braid hanging well below her hips, as she gazed out to sea. Even though I couldn't see her face, I knew it'd be tracked with tears."

Aunt Birdie glanced aside for a moment, her own eyes suspiciously bright. "I knew here" – she touched a hand to her heart – "that she was pining for a lover who'd gone to sea and would never return."

"Then she was gone." Cilla guessed.

"If she'd even been there. Your uncle said she was moon glow reflecting on the stones." Aunt Birdie looked back at her, blinking. "I believe otherwise. I even sensed her name. *Gudrid*. If she was there, I like to think my sympathy was a comfort to her."

"So Castle Varrich was Viking?" Cilla could see the ruined tower's crumbling, V-shaped walls in her mind. "I thought it looked medieval."

"The ruins are medieval." Aunt Birdie dabbed at her eyes with a napkin. "The castle belonged to Clan Mackay and dates back to the fourteenth century. Local tradition claims a Norse stronghold stood on the site long before the Mackays set the first foundation stone."

Cilla shivered. "I'd like to see it."

"You should." Aunt Birdie looked determined. "If you don't mind riding in a lorry, Robbie and Roddie can drop you off in Tongue later today. They'll pass through the village with our peat and can leave you at the Ben Loyal Hotel. The path up to the ruin starts near there, just beside the bank."

Cilla's heart gave a little flip. "Can I walk back?"

"You could." Aunt Birdie considered. "But that would mean walking clear through Tongue, not that it's more than a blip in the road, then you'd pass some sheep fields before heading back across the Kyle causeway. Once on our side again, you'd turn right at the

cemetery and then face an even longer trek back here."

"That's quite a hike."

"It is." Aunt Birdie tapped her chin with a long, red-lacquered fingernail. "Much too far. I'll drive over to the Ben Loyal and wait for you in their Bistro Bar or restaurant, An Garbh."

"An Garbh?" Cilla lifted a brow.

"It's Gaelic for 'hilly place.' The restaurant has huge picture windows with views of Ben Loyal and Ben Hope and even your castle ruin. If the scenery isn't enough, they play classical music as you dine." Aunt Birdie sat back, looking pleased. "Maybe we'll grab dinner there. They have the most divine menu."

"Well…"

"You'd love their hand-cut chips." Aunt Birdie pulled out the big guns. "They really are the best."

Cilla swallowed.

Her mouth watered. Excitement beat inside her. The day, as her aunt painted it, did sound like a lovely and enjoyable outing. Who could resist a cliff-top castle ruin?

Especially when followed by the promise of delicious hand-cut French fries?

As a lover of atmospheric old places and a dedicated, card-carrying potato zealot, she couldn't think of a better way to spend the afternoon.

She also loved classical music.

Still…

"Will I find my way up the ruin and back okay?" That was her only consideration. "The cliff looked pretty steep and wooded from my window."

"The path is well marked." Aunt Birdie dismissed her concern. "It isn't all that steep. I haven't been up there in a while, but I don't recall it being too difficult a climb."

"If you're sure." Cilla didn't want to admit she wasn't in the best shape.

If only she was one of those lucky women who lost their appetite when things went wrong.

Unfortunately, getting ditched by Grant and then seeing her business crumble had increased her passion for food and decreased her desire to exercise.

"Of course, I'm sure." Aunt Birdie smiled in satisfaction. "The fresh air will do you good and-"

"Eeeeee!" A woman's high-pitched cry rose from somewhere else in the castle, accompanied by a loud, clattering crash and a dog's wild barking.

Cilla's heart slammed against her ribs. She whirled toward the

door, her ears ringing.

Aunt Birdie leapt to her feet. Her teacup shattered on the tile floor.

"Aaaaaaaiiiiii!" The woman screamed again.

This time a low, heavy-sounding *thud* cut off her screech.

"That was Behag, the cook!" Aunt Birdie sprinted from the conservatory.

"Wait!" Cilla hurried around the table, her feet slipping in the spilled tea.

Colonel Darling and Violet Manyweathers were already out the door. They chased after Aunt Birdie, the three of them streaking down the corridor with incredible speed. Flora Duthie hobbled in their wake, the tap-tapping of her cane loud in the vaulted passage now that the echoes of the ruckus were fading.

Only Leo kept up the din.

His frantic yapping filled the corridor, the shrill barks cresting the ear-piercing level only achieved by the smallest of dogs.

Far ahead of Cilla, her aunt and the old dears disappeared around a curve in the passageway, leaving her to pull up the rear.

Heart in her throat, she ran ever faster until she barreled around a corner and nearly slammed into the colonel's gray-suited back.

Fisted hands on his hips, he blocked the arched entry into the kitchen. "I've said for years that she dips into Mac's spirit cabinet!" he scolded, sounding righteous. "Now we have the proof!"

"Proof schmoof." That came from Honoria. "She was making your breakfast is what she was doing. Everyone else eats scrambled eggs. You order yours soft-cooked and not a jot over or under six minutes!"

The colonel's back stiffened. "Harridan."

"Oh, stop, both of you!" Aunt Birdie pushed past him, her usual calm flown.

Colonel Darling moved then, and Cilla caught a glimpse of the housekeeper past his square-set shoulders. Kneeling, Honoria pressed a cloth to the forehead of a huge blond-haired woman, her entire apron-clad bulk lying prone on the kitchen's stone-flagged floor.

Smashed crockery and a spreading puddle of steaming porridge lay beside her. A great wooden stirring spoon, Flora's silver porringer, and an upturned basket of freshly-baked soda farls added to the chaos.

Leo ran in circles in front of the long work counter, his gaze repeatedly darting to the window above the large copper sink.

"Goodness me!" Aunt Birdie's voice rose. "What happened here?"

"Did she have a … is she…?" Cilla clamped her mouth shut,

realizing too late that the words *heart attack* and *dead* were best left unspoken in a place like Dunroamin.

"Nae, she isn't deid." Flora tottered forward to poke the cook with her cane. "This is the work of the Vikings, sure as I'm standing here! Behag Finney is one of them." She touched the tip of her cane to the cook's flaxen hair. "They've come to collect her. She just fainted before they could spirit her away."

"This has nothing to do with Vikings." Honoria dipped her cloth into a basin, then, after wringing it out, slapped it once more onto the cook's forehead.

"'Twas the devil, it was," she insisted, splaying her fingers to better press the cooling rag against Behag's pale skin.

"The devil?" Cilla's stomach dropped.

Surely Hardwick wouldn't stoop to frightening helpless old women? Overweight, middle-aged cooks in faded blue dresses and flour-stained aprons?

Honoria was nodding, her face grim.

"I saw him myself." She flashed a look at the colonel, as if expecting him to deny it. "Bright red, horned, and big as the day, he was. Looking in through the window just there," she said, flinging out an arm to indicate the sink. "I saw him when I came in here to fetch Flora's wooden bowl."

"Humph!" Colonel Darling snorted.

Aunt Birdie wrung her hands.

Cilla stared at them all, wondering.

What a pity she didn't have any answers.

Chapter Seven

Several hours later, Cilla paused halfway up the steep and overgrown path to Castle Varrich. She'd never dreamed a hiking trail would be barely wide enough for her feet. This one was, and as she eyed the ever rising track, she considered defeat. Great was the temptation to return to the cozy, oh-so-level public rooms of the Ben Loyal Hotel.

She could call Aunt Birdie and go back to Dunroamin. Sort through the packing crates of Uncle Mac's broken china, organize her tools, and wait for her kiltie to make an appearance. Already, he loomed before her mind's eye, his big strong hands hooked around his kilt belt, and looking ready to sate any woman's hottest dreams.

Her heart began a slow, hard thumping.

She almost ached to feel his touch again. His rich, whisky-smooth voice played across her memory, the deep lilting tones strumming vulnerable places. How typical that she'd hoped to spend the afternoon not thinking about her sexy Highland ghost, yet she couldn't keep him out of her mind.

She should be angry, not melting over his Scottish accent.

If her suspicions were true, he'd used a silly devil disguise to scare her and then did the same thing to the poor innocent cook. She didn't want to believe he'd do such a thing, but she'd seen his conjuring skills. Any ghost who could appear so real and also make a solid-looking medieval shield pop in and out of thin air could surely whip up a devil face.

Hadn't he flicked his fingers and created a wooden, water-filled bathing tub in the middle of her bedroom?

So, anything was possible.

She had good reason to suspect him.

Yet here she was – away from his ghostly reach – and just thinking about him made her heart do flip-flops.

He'd made it clear he wanted her gone. Even so, however she turned it, she wanted him.

No man had ever affected her so intensely.

A man who was a ghost!

Frustration biting hard, she glared at the trail rising in front of her. She had no business struggling up slippery, weed-infested footpaths. What she needed was an appointment with a shrink.

Instead, she bent down to plunge a finger beneath the top of her sock, fishing around until she located the tiny, impossible-to-identify beetle-like creature who'd decided to enjoy intimate terms

with her ankle.

Pleased to end the association before it could get too serious, she placed the bug on one of the giant bracken fronds clogging the path. Then she shuddered.

Aunt Birdie had lied out her ears.

The only thing easy about reaching the ruined tower was finding the wooden '*Footpath to Castle Varrich*' signpost next to the village bank.

After that, it'd been a nightmarish trek that had her huffing and puffing and growing hotter with each step along the almost vertical path. Her lungs burned, a nasty stitch jabbed her side, and the back of her shirt stuck to her skin. That last despite the shade of the dark, thick-growing trees and the earthy-damp chill of the air.

She shouldn't be surprised.

Of course, the ancient Mackay castle builders or the Norsemen before them wouldn't have built a defensive stronghold in an easily accessible place. She'd seen the height of the tower's jutting headland from her window.

She should've known it wouldn't be easy.

Or that piece-of-pie to her was a whole 'nother animal to Aunt Birdie.

After all, her aunt had once spent six weeks backpacking through the wilds of Indonesia. Alone, save the company of an equally adventurous girlfriend and – gasp! – her friend's nine year old daughter.

With the exception of a few close encounters with leeches while skinny dipping in a pond in a bamboo wood on Bali, and contracting food poisoning after dining with locals somewhere in the rain forest of Sulawesi, Aunt Birdie called the adventure a delight.

Cilla swiped her forehead with her shirtsleeve.

She had to be tougher.

But finding a bug in her sock wasn't funny. In fact, it'd been the last straw.

So she considered her options. The footpath had shrunk to a muddy thread barely discernible beneath a sea of clinging, waist-high bracken. She suspected the beetle had innumerable friends and relatives lurking there. Each one eager to make her acquaintance the instant she plunged onward.

She eyed the bracken with renewed aversion.

A cool pint in the Ben Loyal's Bistro Bar was sounding better by the moment.

Still, she really did want to see the tower ruin.

Besides, stomping up a mountain might just purge her of wicked, not-good-for-her mind wanderings. So she braced her hands

on her thighs and breathed deep until she was no longer quite so winded.

She straightened, her mood lifting when she caught a glimpse of the tower through the trees. High above her, its stones beckoned, using lichen and age to lure her on.

"You're hopeless," she muttered, disgusted by the ease with which old stones won out over a pint of real ale in a pub that reeked of charm and coziness.

She was mad, for sure.

Quickly, before she could think too deeply on Mr. Beetle and his pals, she tossed back her hair and struck off through the bracken.

Barbed deer fencing soon blocked the way, but a tricky scramble up and over a rickety ladder-like stile brought her to a low hand-railed causeway across a bog and – lo – not far from the end of the wood-planked walk, the footpath rose in straight line to the ruin.

Unfortunately, the last stretch looked to be the steepest.

She took a deep breath and forged on. The mud was slippery, and once a scatter of pebbles almost sent her plunging down the grassy slope into the Kyle. But then she was at the top, picking her way over a small heap of tumbled masonry to reach a jagged opening in the tower wall.

Whether a door or just a gap caused by falling rubble, she clambered through it into the ruin's interior.

Little more than a dim, earthy-smelling enclosure, small and circular, Castle Varrich's roofless walls embraced her. Shadows shifted, then wrapped around her like a cloak, soft and beguiling. A slanting ray of sun picked out a drift of old leaves beneath the remains of a window embrasure.

Halfway up the wall, the gaping niche held a sense of poignancy as if the onetime window remembered sharing its views with long-ago souls and missed them.

Cilla's heart thumped.

She could easily imagine Aunt Birdie's Viking maid standing in the arched alcove. Or sitting on the embrasure's stone bench, its hard contours softened by fur rugs and colorful pillows instead of blurred by smears of mold and dirt, the flotsam of ages.

Enchanted, Cilla took a few steps deeper into the tower, her pulse quickening.

Each muddied, moss-grown stone shimmered with the past. If only they could speak. Tell tales of all they'd seen and heard down the centuries.

She shivered, wishing it was so.

Aunt Birdie once said that every blade of grass in Scotland had a story clinging to it, each stone and clump of heather, its own mythic

bit of legend and lore.

Now she believed it.

Castle Varrich was the stuff of dreams.

Scotland as she'd always imagined it.

To experience this kind of history live, she could handle a bug or two in her sock. Even tromping up a path that was so steep she could have bitten into the ground before her.

None of that mattered now.

She peered about, her shoulders relaxing and her tense, overexerted thigh muscles beginning to loosen. For the first time since passing the footpath sign, she smiled.

No, she grinned.

She was inside a genuine, honest-to-goodness castle ruin. The thrill was almost more than she could bear.

Carefully, with all the awe and reverence she knew she'd feel at such a moment, she placed her hands on the chill, damp stones. Ancient stones, worn smooth by countless raindrops, some cracked and broken by constant exposure to icy, northern wind.

She pressed her palms against the wall, letting her fingers explore the cold, uneven surface. She tried to breathe in their essence, almost expecting – no, hoping – to feel a slight pulse or vibration.

Nothing happened.

She did hear sheep bleating somewhere in the distance.

A soft sigh followed by a slight rustling.

She blinked as chill sped down her spine and the fine hairs on her nape lifted.

Such sounds could've been Gudrid. Aunt Birdie's Norse maid at the window embrasure. More likely, it'd been the soughing of the wind through the ivy spilling down one side of the ruin.

Hoping to increase her chances of glimpsing the ghost – if indeed she'd made the noises – Cilla studied the stretch of wall rising up to the crumbling window alcove.

There were enough footholds to get her up there.

If she didn't slip.

She glanced at the hard-packed earthen floor. Stones and fallen rubble were everywhere. Not to mention what she was sure must be stinging nettle growing around the wall edges. Whatever goo and what-not hid beneath the piles of old, dead leaves.

Falling wouldn't be pretty.

A spill in the other direction, out the window, would be even worse. She'd tumble straight down the grassy slope, roll over the cliff-edge and land in the Kyle.

Where she'd promptly drown if she was still alive when her body hit the water.

She took a step closer to the wall, her mind working furiously.

Climbing up was dangerous. But the window was where the tower's hall would have been. She could see the line of joist holes for the hall's wooden floor. If she could make it that far, she could swing herself into the embrasure. Unfortunately, now that she was close, the alcove looked even higher. Peering up at it, she willed herself to be brave. After all, she was Aunt Birdie's niece.

She had courage in her blood.

As if to tempt her, a rock protruded near the base of the wall. She stuck out her foot, nudging the stone to see if it wiggled.

It didn't.

She eyed the rock, considering.

Then she heard the rustling again and made her decision.

Heart thumping, she shimmied up the wall and scrambled into the alcove before she could change her mind. Her goal reached, she pushed to her feet. Then she braced her hands on either side of the recess and felt her heart drop.

The window was much higher than she'd realized, but she'd been right about one thing.

Falling out would be worse than toppling back in.

It was a long way down to the Kyle. Harrowing, rocky, and steep didn't begin to describe it.

It was that bad.

Trying to pretend her knees weren't trembling, she cast a look at the cracked stone bench against one side of the alcove. There should have been a second, opposite facing seat, but that one had apparently done what she was determined not to do. At some point in time, it'd fallen out the window.

Broken bits of it dotted the ground at the base of the tower.

She shuddered and – having decided the remaining bench wasn't going anywhere for a while – she eased herself onto its cold stone seat.

Maybe she'd stay there forever.

There were worse fates.

It seemed a better option than worrying about how she was going to get back down.

You could have spared yourself this…

No odd fluttery rustle, but the purring voice of her old nemesis, Dawn Paterson, seemed to brush past her ear.

She could almost see her rival before her. How she'd preened in the front room of her parents' Charm Box Antique and Jewelry Shoppe. Haughty and snide, she'd sneered the words that squelched Cilla's livelihood.

You always did act without thinking. A shame you didn't consider

how poorly your wares were selling before bothering to make more.

Cilla closed her eyes and blocked her ears.

She didn't need to be reminded that Vintage Chic had gone down the tubes. Or that she was presently stuck on an ice-cold medieval bench that might crumble beneath her any minute.

Just because it looked sturdy didn't mean it was.

Hardwick looked and felt solid, but he was still a ghost.

Cilla leaned back against the wall, wondering when and why her world had turned so crazy. Hoping to gain some control, she lifted her chin, giving her jaw just enough thrust to make her feel bold, in charge of her fate.

It helped.

She did feel better - until two things happened at once.

The weird rustling returned, this time sounding like the flapping of big leathery wings. Then kiltie was there, too!

Once again disguised as the devil, he hovered in midair, leering down at her from just above the top of the roofless tower.

"Gah!" She leapt to her feet.

He swooped lower, his horned visage bobbing crazily against the broken ridge of the tower's rim.

His eyes glittered, black as coals.

With blurring speed, he popped over the rim, dropping a few feet into the tower before *whooshing* back up again.

"It won't work!" She shook a fist at him. "I know it's you and you can't scare me. Not kilted, not red-deviled, and not even if you show up as a werewolf!"

The words made her feel good.

Brave.

But her foot slipped on the edge of the window recess and she slammed onto her knees, nearly toppling over the side to the rock-strewn floor.

"Arrrggggh!" She grabbed the bench, holding tight.

"Have a care, lass." His soft voice sounded low, deeply seductive.

More surprising, it came from beneath her, while his red-devil face soared ever upward, finally swinging back and forth high above the tower.

"I dinnae think I can catch you a third time." He spoke again, his burr sliding around her like a caress. "No' here, anyway."

"Then we're even." Cilla braced herself against his honeyed words, kept her gaze on his devil disguise. "I don't want to be caught by you anywhere. Your ventriloquist skills don't impress me."

"My what?"

"The word isn't important." She tightened her grip on the

bench, her pulse skittering. “It means the ability to make your voice sound as if it’s coming from somewhere else. Any two-bit magician can-”

Auk-auk-auk!

A set of powerful pinions rose from behind the devil’s curving red horns. Cinnamon-brown with a narrow band of white, the wings beat furiously as the entire ferocious-looking bird came into view.

The devil mask dropped several feet, only held aloft by a red cord clutched in the bird’s talons.

Cilla gasped, staring at the ferocious-looking raptor.

Beneath her, near the tower doorway, stood Hardwick, eyes narrowed and jaw fiercely set. A breeze tossed his long, silky black hair around his powerful, plaid-draped shoulders as he stared up at her, his shield clutched in his hands.

His gaze held hers, dark and intent. “So that’s what you meant by red-deviled.”

“I-” Cilla flushed. She started to deny it, but just then the rustling came again, now recognizable as the bird’s rapid wingbeats.

Auk, auk, he screeched, keen eyes watching them as he made several high-speed swoops around the tower. Then he soared upward, the devil mask trailing after him like a surreal red-painted kite.

Clearly enjoying himself, he looped back to dive at them, his wings almost completely closed. Coming fast, he sped over the tower rim with barely an inch to spare. He shot up again, this time twirling and spinning in a series of aerial acrobatics before once again sailing around the tower. He released the mask on his fifth pass.

Overlarge and unwieldy, it fell like a stone, landing with a loud thwack near Hardwick’s feet.

Another *auk* and the bird beat away over the Kyle.

Kiltie bent to pick up the mask and carefully propped it against a heap of nettle-covered stones.

Cilla cleared her throat. “It’s a mask.”

He shot an annoyed look at her. “Aye, so it is.”

He touched a finger to one of the glistening horns, examining its curve. A muscle ticked in his jaw and his eyes held an unreadable expression.

It could have been anger.

Watching him, Cilla knotted her hands against the stone bench and pushed to her feet. She could feel hot color blooming on her cheeks. Her heart began a slow, shame-driven thumping. Ghost or not, she’d wronged this man. Every inch of him screamed that he knew it.

Knew she’d suspected him of guising himself as the devil to frighten her.

Her gaze again slid to the mask. Hideous with its black glitter eyes and leering smile, it reminded her of the get-ups worn at Carnival in New Orleans and Rio.

I'm sorry. The apology stuck in her throat.

She owed him one, for sure.

But he'd stepped into the shaft of light slanting into the tower and he looked so rock-hard solid and gorgeous that she knew if she opened her mouth she'd babble something she'd regret.

Something like *oh my, oh my*.

She moistened her lips, knew she was blushing.

He set down his shield and folded his arms. "I've been called many things in my time, but ne'er red-deviled."

"I-" Cilla glanced briefly out the window arch. The bird was now a black speck above the moors on the other side of the Kyle. "I wouldn't have called you that either if-"

"Nor – until this day - has anyone e'er suggested I might enjoy sprouting fur and growing fangs." He sounded highly insulted.

"As for my kilt-"

"Oh, please!" Cilla tossed back her hair. She didn't want to hear about his kilt. "What was I supposed to think?"

She indicated the mask with a flick of her hand. "I open the shutters to see that face sailing towards me. Behag Finney – or whatever the cook's name is – fainted from fright after it appeared at the kitchen window. Then I come up here to get away for an afternoon and there it is again, popping up out of nowhere."

"You thought it was me."

"Of course, I did! That's what you do – appear and disappear all the time."

He remained unmoved. "I see."

"No you don't." She frowned at him. "But you should. It's uncanny the way you're here, there, and everywhere."

"That, sweetness, is what ghosts do." He said that as if she should know it. "After seven hundred years it's become a habit."

"Exactly, and that's what I meant. You're a ghost. Since meeting you" – she waved a hand, struggling to find the right words – "I have to believe anything is possible."

"Even flying red devils and werewolves?"

"Even them."

"Then, lass, you err," he said, a note of regret in his voice. "There are some things that are no'possible."

Cilla started to argue that if he was possible, anything should be. But he was suddenly directly beneath her, having crossed the tower without her having even seen him take one step.

"That's another thing ghosts do, isn't it?" She spoke the

obvious. “Move across a room in the blink of an eye.”

He shrugged. “It’s an advantage, aye. Moving quickly is one of the little things that amuses. It helps break the tedium of our daily lives.”

“You call it a life?” The words slipped out before she could stop them.

He blinked. Then he ran a hand over his head and his chest as if assuring himself that he was really there.

Heat seared the back of Cilla’s neck, embarrassment scalding her as he held his arms out to his sides and wriggled his fingers. He examined first one hand and then the other, before looking back up at her.

“Aye, I call it so.” His mouth quirked. “Such as it is. I am here. That is enough.”

“But how did you get to this ruin? You haunt Dunroamin.” Her brow knit. “I thought ghosts were bound to a particular place? Did you follow me here?”

He clapped a hand to his chest and pretended to reel backward. “So many questions.” His dark eyes twinkled. “Why don’t we get you down from there and I’ll answer them.”

“I should get down from here, that’s true.” She cast another glance at the view, the long drop to the water below. She’d forgotten she was still in the window recess. Even more startling, that one quick glimpse at his humor did funny things to her knees.

He had a dynamite smile.

But it disappeared when he spread his arms again and stepped closer to the wall.

He looked up at her, his expression earnest. “I told you, I may no’ be able to catch you here. I should be able to cushion a fall if you slip. You need to turn around and climb down using the same footholds you used to get up there.”

Cilla's heart dropped.

She couldn’t remember where the footholds were. Nor could she see them from this angle. Glancing down, she measured the distance between her and the tower floor.

It was a long way down.

Her knees began to tremble. “Why can’t you catch me again? You did before.”

“Because this is no’ Dunroamin.” He said that as if it explained everything.

"I don't understand."

“It cost me much energy to come here.” A line etched into his brow on the admission. “Without my full strength, I cannae be certain I can catch you. I’ll no’ risk that. It’s safer if you climb down.”

So she did, dropping first to her knees and then scooting round to scramble down before any other thought could enter her mind. All she focused on was trusting that his outspread arms would soften the worst of a possible fall.

Safely at the bottom, she dusted her hands to give her heart time to stop galloping. Then she took a deep breath and braced herself against other dangers.

The most notable being him.

"Why did you follow me here?" She tilted her head, aware of his exotic sandalwood scent, heady in the closeness of the ruin. "Since you lose strength outside Dunroamin?"

To her surprise, he laughed.

But it was a humorless laugh, empty of the delicious tinge of bemusement that had lit his eyes when he'd pretended to stagger beneath her questions.

"Ach, lass." He put his hands on his hips and glanced up at the sky above the roofless tower. "I didnae follow you here. I was at the ruin before you arrived."

"But why? If you haunt Dunroamin?" Cilla looked at him, a funny little sensation in her belly warning that, despite what he might say, he was here because of her.

When he stepped closer, his gaze locked on hers, she was certain.

"I dinnae haunt Dunroamin." Pride made Hardwick clarify. "If you would know the truth, ghosts have better things to do with their time than haunt people or places. I stay at Dunroamin because" – he paused, searching for the best words – "it suits me to do so."

And I came here to get away from you.

"Why?"

"Why what?" He shoved a hand through his hair, his mind elsewhere.

Indeed, he'd scarce heard her. She'd bent to pick up the devil mask and in doing so, presented him with a tantalizing view of her shapely arse.

"Why what I asked you before." She made it sound like he was a lackwit. "Why are you at Dunroamin, and here. You don't have a Highland name so I don't think you're attached to Uncle Mac's family and-"

"My mother was a Shaw." He tried to tear his gaze from her bobbing buttocks and couldn't. "Clan Macintosh and Highland to the bone."

"That doesn't explain your business here."

"You dinnae want anything to do with the reason I'm here."

"I'm curious." She straightened, the devil face clutched in her hands. But the damage was done. Worse, the way she gripped the mask, holding it fast against her, pushed up her full breasts so that they swelled against her clingy blue top.

Hardwick swore beneath his breath. He could even make out the contours of her nipples. Chill-tightened and thrusting, they were as visible as if she once again stood wet and naked before him.

Wet. Naked.

The two words whipped through him, blotting reason.

His blood flamed and heat swept low, gripping his vitals and squeezing tight. So exquisitely tight that he reached for her, setting his hands on her shoulders and holding her still, lest she move again and cause her beautiful breasts to jiggle. Or worse, present him with another delectable glimpse of her sweetly-rounded bottom.

"Curiosity, lass, is no' always a good thing." He shook his head slowly. "No' a good thing at all."

"Even so-"

"Nae, lass." He couldn't give in to her. "Trust me and leave it be."

"Trust you?" Her eyes flashed blue. "When you won't answer the simplest questions?"

Before he could respond, a crack widened in the wall and where a moment before crumbled mortar had filled the narrow space between stones, several sets of fiery red eyes peered out at him.

He jerked, releasing Cilla just as a thin, papery hand reached out of the crack to crook a finger at him.

Oblivious to the jeering hags in the wall behind her, Cilla also stared at him. His heart racing, his blood chilled as he did his best to ignore the crones. He returned his gaze to Cilla, willing himself not to see her large blue eyes peering at him, but Bran of Barra's ugly red-bearded face.

The Hebridean varlet owed him a favor or two, so he doubted the lout would mind.

He took it further, imagining his friend rocking back on his heels, then slapping his thigh in mirth. Roaring with the irony that for once, he – Hardwick, the rogue of all rogues – couldn't just toss a lass over his shoulder, carry her off to bed, and air her skirts just because it pleased him.

Not that he'd treat this one thusly.

Cilla begged a slow and thorough ravishing, hell hags or no.

So he reached for her again. But his strength was ebbing and he couldn't grip her shoulders. Leastways not as firmly as he'd hoped to do.

"Lass…" He smoothed his knuckles down her cheek, then

lifted a lock of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers. That he could do, hard as it was to touch her at all. “Would that we’d met in another time, another place.”

“I know!” Cilla agreed, her agitation forgotten. Her heart split. He’d voiced what she hadn’t dared to accept, but knew in her heart to be true. They had a profound attraction, a connection that defied time and worlds. Ever since she’d first seen him, she’d imagined his embrace. She’d ached for him to kiss her.

And now it was going to happen!

She was sure of it.

His words, the way he was looking at her, just everything, told her that was so.

Pulse racing, she waited for his lips to close over hers, first brushing gently, then with increasing insistence until he crushed her against him and devoured her mouth in a rough, bruising kiss.

The kind Grant A Hughes III had only given her in dreams.

Pleasure she wasn't going to enjoy now, either, because just when he leaned in so close she could feel his warm breath on her cheek, he released her again so quickly she dropped the devil mask.

Whipping about, he strode across the tower and snatched up his discarded shield. When he turned back to her, he held it in front of him as if he expected her to run him through with a sword.

He didn’t look like a man who’d been about to kiss her buggy socks off.

He looked furious.

He couldn’t even meet her eyes, his gaze repeatedly going past her to a spot on the crumbling, moss-grown wall.

Mortification swept her. Had she really puckered her lips? She had, and couldn’t believe her ridiculousness. How low she’d fallen to assume he’d wanted to kiss her. Heat jabbed into the backs of her eyes, making her humiliation complete.

Even Grant the ratfink hadn't made her cry.

His face dark, Kiltie stepped up to her and had the nerve to brush her cheek with his thumb.

“This, sweetness” - he glanced at his hand, the wetness glistening there – “is the reason you shouldnae have come to Dunroamin.”

“American women go where they want.” Cilla kept her chin raised and glared at him.

The blaze in his own eye could’ve lit a bonfire. “I have ne’er been a man to make women weep. I dinnae like it and that’s also the reason I came here, to Castle Varrich, today. I'll no’ make such a mistake again.”

Unable to bear having him see her embarrassment a moment longer, Cilla stooped to snatch up the devil mask. This time when she straightened, he was gone.

"Damn!" She swiped a hand over her cheek.

Then tossed back her hair and started for the doorway. Beyond the jagged opening, she could see clouds building out over the Kyle. Soon it would rain. Already, she could smell the chill moisture in the air.

That and a lingering whiff of sandalwood.

Just enough to pinch her heart.

But as she hefted the devil mask against her hip to scramble out of the ruin, she knew two things she hadn't known before she'd entered it.

Firstly – the mask was not the devil face she'd seen outside her window. She glanced at the name label sewn into the inside of the mask, sure of it. However the devil face came to be in the possession of a giant bird, it wasn't sinister.

She'd seen the real thing.

This was simply a mask that had once been the property of one Erlend Eggertsson.

She shuddered, not about to contemplate the implications when she had a long trek through dark and creepy woods awaiting her.

Instead, she considered her second and most important revelation. She'd almost been kissed by a medieval Highland ghost.

She'd wanted that kiss.

So badly, that she meant to do everything in her power to find out why it'd gone wrong.

Then, if for once her luck would change, she just might be able to make things right.

At the very least, she meant to try.

Chapter Eight

"It had to have been Gregor." Aunt Birdie nodded. "The question is, where did he get such a thing?" She gripped the edge of the small round table and leaned forward. "It doesn't make sense. A red devil mask, here in the middle of nowhere."

"I can't imagine." Cilla popped a mini pretzel into her mouth.

The tiny salted tidbits were addictive, and compliments of the Ben Loyal Hotel's Bistro Bar where they sat in a quiet corner. Already, she'd nibbled her way through one rather full bowl. This second portion would soon be gone, too.

Especially since each bite helped take her mind off the origin of her devil face, the one she'd seen at her window. The obvious answer – *hell* - was a road she didn't want to go down. Certainly not in a discussion with Aunt Birdie. She doubted her aunt's ghost-friendly outlook would extend to the fiend of all fiends.

Frowning, she shoved aside the bowl of pretzels.

Too much salt wasn't good for you.

Neither was dwelling on things that would only add flames, perhaps literally, to the already scary situation at Dunroamin. She also needed to stop fretting over almost-kisses that hadn't and never would happen.

She shifted on her chair, even now feeling Hardwick's strong, warm hands settle on her shoulders. She remembered how her senses had leapt into overdrive, her entire body igniting as he'd stepped so close and looked down at her with such heat in his eyes.

She'd been sure he was about to kiss her.

And not just any kiss, but the deep, plundering kind that burned into a woman's soul and left her melting all over a man. Breathless, needy, and begging for more, certain the world will stop spinning if he didn't slake her craving.

With a gusty sigh, she crossed her legs, squeezing them together just a tad more than she'd usually do.

She frowned.

She really needed to forget him.

Sitting up straighter, she cleared her throat. "You really think the bird was Violet Manyfeather's great skua? The bonxie, or whatever they're called?"

"Bonxie, that's right." Aunt Birdie sounded fond of him. "He's quite clever. Though he usually only snatches things from Colonel Darling. Small items like a pen or reading glasses, and once, his favorite pipe."

Cilla's eyes widened. "Was it lit?"

"The pipe?" The smile twitching her aunt's lips said it was.

"With the colonel's own custom blend, too," she elaborated. "A fine smelling mix of vanilla and rum. Achilles was livid."

"From a gentleman's pipe to a devil mask." Cilla shook her head, glad to get her mind on something else. "I still can't believe we managed to get the mask into your car, big as it is."

Aunt Birdie laughed and glanced at the two broken fingernails on her right hand. "We may have wedged it in, my dear, but I'm not so sure we'll ever get it out again. In any event, its horns are ruined."

"Maybe Erlend Eggertson will be so happy to get his mask back, he won't care that we bent the horns."

Aunt Birdie took a few of the mini-pretzels and sat back. "I don't think there is such a man in these parts. Unless he's a recent incomer, and even then-"

"You'd have heard of him."

"Let's just say that if I hadn't, you can bet one of the residents would have. A shame-"

A burst of muted female laughter issuing through the wall behind the bar cut her off. Excited and girly-sounding, the giggles came from the hotel's An Garbh restaurant.

When the noise died down, Aunt Birdie continued, "A shame the An Garbh is so full tonight. You'd have enjoyed dinner there, and I could have asked the proprietors if they know of the Eggertsons. But they looked to have their hands full with" – she paused as another shriek of laughter erupted – "their coach tour guests."

"I peeked in there when I first arrived. I thought you might be here already." Cilla allowed herself one last mini pretzel. A reward for getting her mind off a certain sexy ghost and how good she knew he'd kiss. "I think they're a group of college girls. Australians, I think."

"They're definitely not the usual visitors we see in Tongue. Hill walkers, rock climbers, and the like. And they aren't girls. They're grown women, though some might be fresh out of college." Aunt Birdie took a sip of soda water and lowered her voice. "According to Claire who works the shop at the petrol station, they're fans of Wee Hughie MacSporran-"

Whoosh … crack! A standing bar menu flew off a nearby table. Small but sturdy-looking, it smacked into a chair leg before spinning away across the red-carpeted floor.

Cilla swiveled toward the sound but no one else was in the pub. Even the friendly young barkeep had left his post and wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Aunt Birdie's eyes narrowed, but then she gave a light shrug and

took another sip of her soda water.

"That was odd." Cilla glanced at the fallen menu board, wondering. She sniffed the air, certain she'd caught a tantalizing trace of sandalwood swirling at her from that direction. She looked around, her pulse leaping. The windows to the street stood open, but she couldn't detect a breeze. Nothing at all that would send the menu sailing off its table.

Or cause Hardwick's delicious scent to waft beneath her nose, teasing and tempting her.

Unless...

Her heart skittered.

Foolish, wild hope swept her.

Getting up, she retrieved the menu and returned it to the table. More to check on the drift of sandalwood than from a sudden urge to tidy the hotel's pub.

If the scent had been there, it wasn't anymore.

She tamped down her disappointment. Then she reclaimed her seat, careful not to look at the bowl of mini pretzels. The blasted things seemed to be calling her, and she was not going to weaken.

Not for mini pretzels.

If she knew what was good for her, she'd also ignore imagined whiffs of sandalwood.

Dark smoldering glances and a deep Scots burr so beautiful on the ears that Hardwick ought to walk around wearing a warning sign around his neck:

Caution! Plug your ears or lose your heart.

Knowing what was best for her, she blotted his honey-rich voice from her mind. Her days of melting over *doons*, *aboots*, and how Scotsmen said *earthy*, were over. She'd outgrown the Mad for Plaid club of her teen years. She knew better now than to thrill to tilts in kilts. She was made of sterner stuff and she wasn't falling for a Highlander, especially not a Highland ghost.

Especially one she imagined ate one woman for breakfast, two for lunch, and a full dozen for dinner.

Her cheeks flamed. He'd be a master at making a woman feel that she was a feast to be savored. She inhaled sharply, annoyed by the resentment that pricked her on knowing he hadn't even wanted to kiss her.

She shifted in her chair again, certain her thoughts must be branded on her forehead.

Hoping they weren't, she gave Aunt Birdie her full attention. "Who is Wee Hughie MacSporran?" she asked, grasping for a safe topic.

"We-ll..." Her aunt drew out the word. "He calls himself the

Highland Storyweaver. In short, he's an entrepreneur."

A sound that could have been a snort came from the back of the pub.

Cilla shot a glance that way, namely towards the table with the flying menu board, but nothing stirred.

Her aunt flicked at a pretzel crumb. If she'd noticed, she gave no indication.

But Cilla knew. Hot little flickers of awareness flashed down her nerves and her belly went all fluttery. Annoyed by her reaction to him, she risked another glance at the corner table.

It looked quiet as ever.

Not that the stillness mattered. Even if he was doing that ghostie trick he'd told her about and was keeping invisible, she'd bet the farm he was near.

If so, she wasn't about to let him see how much he affected her.

It wasn't fair that he looked so real, solid.

Like a flesh-and-blood man, and so much hotter than any she'd ever encountered.

Life could be so cruel.

Knowing that was so, she turned back to her aunt. "So Wee Hughie's a businessman?"

"Oh, yes. But it's himself that he markets." Aunt Birdie's brows drew together. "He's written a book or two. His own family history, a bit of Scottish root-searching, and the like. He also lectures and he's-"

A bluidy windbag!

A gust of chill air blasted in through the windows as if to prove it. The pub door flew open and slammed shut with a loud bang.

"Oh, dear." Aunt Birdie placed a hand to her breast. She glanced first at the door, then the windows. "It would seem a storm is brewing."

Indeed, my lady.

Aunt Birdie's face went suspiciously noncommittal.

Cilla's heart pounded wildly. Now she knew he was here. A snort and two comments – all delivered in that buttery-rich burr – was more than enough proof.

His tone and the nature of his comments revealed he didn't like the Scottish author, the entrepreneur, as Aunt Birdie called the man.

Cilla wanted to know why.

With luck, talking about the author would keep her grounded if Hardwick's sexy voice rolled past her ears again. It didn't matter what he said, not even that he sounded really annoyed. It was the *way* he said things, his Scottish accent, that curled her toes and even set off a flurry of butterflies in her belly, a flash flood of heat tingling across her tender parts.

Apparently she hadn't outgrown the Mad for Plaid club.

She was just as bad as every other Scotsman-hungry American female.

She was doomed.

"So-o-o" – she tried to keep her voice level – "why does Wee Hughie have a busload of Aussies trailing after him?"

"Did you not see the placard outside, next to the hotel door?" Aunt Birdie looked surprised. "It has HIRE A HIGHLANDER scrawled in blue across the top. I can't believe you missed it."

"If I'd seen the name Wee Hughie I would've noticed. HIRE A HIGHLANDER would've stopped me in my tracks." Cilla curled her fingers around her pint of Stella Artois lager, squeezing lightly.

She needed focus.

Aunt Birdie didn't need to know that her mind had been so occupied on her rush down the hill that she'd dashed straight past the hotel. She'd only discovered her mistake when the little white-washed croft houses she'd been passing grew sparser, the fields between larger, and the sheep in the fields more plentiful.

She'd been walking blind.

Worrying about the devil at her window that hadn't been a mask and fretting about Hardwick.

Especially him.

Thinking about him still, she looked at her aunt. "What does a poster have to do with Wee Hughie's groupies? I don't see the connection."

Aunt Birdie laughed. "Think again, dear. The poster shows why they're with him. Wee Hughie MacSporran runs Heritage Tours. Guiding, some call it. Anyone can sign on and he then escorts them around the Highlands, regaling them with tales along the way."

"Oh." Cilla nodded, not really caring.

She reached for a pretzel, determined to ignore the sensation that Hardwick was near.

"Wee Hughie's done an Australian book tour or two," her aunt was saying. "Lots of Scots down there and they take their roots seriously. These women are fans. Apparently they sign on for a Highland tour with him every summer."

"He sounds like a rock star."

"So he is, in a Scottish way." Aunt Birdie made a gesture. "You'll soon meet Wee Hughie yourself. He's scheduled to speak in Dunroamin's library next weekend."

Another gust of icy wind swept in through the windows, this time lifting a small stack of coasters off the bar and sending them cart-wheeling through the air.

The barkeep returned then, pushing in through a door behind the

bar. He carried their order on a tray, jacket potatoes with cheese and baked beans. Coming straight to their table, he plunked down the plates with an apologetic smile. Then he scurried, unasked, to refresh their drinks, his young face flushed from hurrying.

"Sorry you had to wait." Quick as lightning, he turned away, scooping up the scattered coasters on his hasty retreat to the bar. "There's an event in the An Garbh this e'en," he tossed over his shoulder before disappearing through the door he'd used to enter the pub. "Keeping us right busy they are, just!"

"Goodness." Aunt Birdie looked after him, then put down her glass of soda water and went to the bar. A few books and a little pile of flyers were displayed there. Taking one of each, she returned to the table. "Here. These will give you an idea of who Wee Hughie is."

Cilla set down the fork she'd been about to plunge into her baked potato and picked up the book. The title, *Royal Roots*, jumped out at her. Several inches tall, the words blazed across the top of the book in bright gold letters. A subtitle, *A Highlander's Guide to Discovering Illustrious Forebears,* followed in smaller lettering. The rest of the cover showed a tall, rather corpulent Highlander posing in front of the famous Bannockburn statue of Robert the Bruce.

The flyer announced a series of "Meet Your Ancestors" tea-and-talk events to be held at the Bettyhill Museum, the Loch Croispol Bookshop and Restaurant in Balnakeil, and – no surprise – Dunroamin Castle Residential Retirement Home.

Humph.

The snort came so close to Cilla's ear she would've sworn Hardwick was leaning over her shoulder. Before she could glance around, the main pub door opened and closed again, this time falling shut with a quiet click.

An almost imperceptible little snick that sounded oddly final.

Cilla frowned. The book and the flyer felt suddenly cold beneath her fingers.

She set them down, not missing that the chill wind had stopped gusting through the window. The whole feel of the air shifted and changed. That last humph and the closing of the door cinched it. If Hardwick had been there, he'd now left.

Which had a silver lining - she could finally bring up the subject she'd been wanting to discuss.

Wee Hughie MacSporran seemed a perfect way to ease into it.

"What's a 'Meet Your Ancestors' tea?" She pitched her voice casually. "Does Wee Hughie introduce a parade of ghostly forebears during his presentations?"

Aunt Birdie almost choked on a bit of baked potato. "Oh!" She dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "That would be interesting, my

dear. He claims direct descent from Robert Bruce and just about every other notable in Scottish history. It'd be quite a roll call of luminaries if he summoned them to his lectures."

"So what does he do?" Cilla hoped her aunt didn't see her nervousness.

"He tells tales about them." Aunt Birdie waved an airy hand. "He regales his audience with anecdotes from his famed ancestors and then does a question and answer round. He'll also spin a yarn about your own family history if you challenge him with a Scottish surname."

Cilla looked down, toying with her food. "Maybe he'll know something about the Eggertsons?"

"Could be." Aunt Birdie took a bite of baked beans. "He's rumored to have extensive knowledge of the clans, so he might well know of other names."

"I wonder if he would know anything about a place called Seagrave or" – Cilla drew a breath, then rushed on – "a medieval family named de Studley?"

"You could certainly ask him." Aunt Birdie smiled, her deep blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "Seagrave rings a faint bell. I believe it's a ruin on the east coast, north of Aberdeen. Rather like the touristy Dunnottar, but left wild, totally untouched except by time."

"What about the de Studleys?"

Aunt Birdie shook her head. "I can't say that I've heard of them, my dear. Sorry."

Can't say that I've heard of them.

The words hit Hardwick like a kick in the shins.

He frowned and stepped deeper into the shadows near the door. To be sure, Birdie MacGhee had never heard of his family. He'd left no issue, and those who'd remained and could have, though not directly cursed, met their own untimely ends until the line was no more.

Even Seagrave, mighty holding that it'd been, had suffered. Other families came and went, tearing down towers or adding wings until, ultimately, they, too, disappeared into the mists of time.

Leaving Seagrave to crumble into the sea, stone by stone, until the curse ran its course. A sorry state and the very reason he had no business standing here, deliberately letting Cilla think he'd gone.

Souls who insisted on peeking beneath rocks were bound to discover things they didn't want to see.

Or hear.

Yet he couldn't leave.

She drew him like a lodestone. Try as he might, he couldn't blank

his mind to the image of her tilting her head back for his kiss, her face going all soft and dreamy and her lips just beginning to part. A brief glimpse of the tip of her tongue to tantalize and enflame him.

He clenched his hands, squeezing them tight when she shifted on her chair causing her jacket to gape slightly, allowing him a splendid view of her full, round breasts.

A sweet temptation he had no business admiring, not that he could tear his gaze away. Nor did it help that she was looking right at him, her eyes earnest and her brows drawn together. Almost as if she saw him despite the cloaking shield he'd willed around himself.

There were, he knew, some souls who could see bogles always regardless of a ghost's honest attempts at remaining unseen.

Or, he strongly suspected, times when the pull between two souls was so powerful that the veils separating time and place just ceased to exist.

Sure that was the way of it, his heart started a slow hard beating. A rush of warmth swept him, filling him with a deep longing that had nothing to do with her sweet, golden beauty, much as he was drawn by her loveliness.

It was more than that.

So much more, he felt his need for her to his bones.

He frowned, almost willing himself wholly visible until her gaze shifted past him to the windows and Castle Varrich. She stared out at the ruin, but her mind was clearly turned inward.

Hardwick's body tensed and he narrowed his eyes on her, waiting. Seven hundred years of pleasuring women let him know them well. He could easily read the tempting American. She was about to make an important pronouncement.

"Aunt Birdie…." She returned her attention to her aunt, her tone proving him right. "There was another reason I wanted us to eat here before going back to Dunroamin. I need to talk to you alone."

Hardwick's ears perked.

Chivalry forgotten, he sidled nearer.

"About Grant?" One of Birdie MacGee's brows arched ever so slightly. "You know you have my sympathies."

"It isn't Grant." A pink tinge stained Cilla's cheeks. "I really am over him. Truth is, looking back, I can't imagine what I ever saw in him."

A jolt of triumph shot through Hardwick.

He edged closer. So near that her clean, fresh scent swirled up to entice him. Nae, to bewitch him, because for one crazy-mad moment he forgot he was a ghost. His lips started to curve in a slow, seductive smile. The kind designed to melt a woman's knees and make her all hot and achy inside. But then he remembered his plight and frowned

instead.

As if she knew her power over him and meant to taunt him even more, she leaned forward and her shoulder brushed lightly against him.

He froze, not daring to move as the warmth of her touch spiraled through him. Not just warm but golden and prickly, the sensation spread like honey-fire, flaming his blood. A fierce longing gripped him and he would've grabbed her, yanking her to her feet and into his arms. He'd steal her breath with hot furious kisses and free her beautiful breasts, letting his hands slide over them, kneading and plumping.

But then a shadow fell across the room, the brief darkening reminding him of the futility of such desires.

Even so, he reached to touch a finger to her cheek, savoring its silky-smooth softness, knowing she'd think his caress was the wind.

She blinked in response, her breath catching audibly.

"Grant was jerk," she said then, speaking to her aunt but looking right at him. "He wasn't even a good kisser. Actually, he was a bad one."

Hardwick's heart soared.

All ears now, he flicked his wrist and conjured a three-legged stool to sit on, plunking it down a good - safe - two tables away from hers.

He dropped onto it, waiting.

"Well?" Her aunt was looking at her. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Ghosts." She cleared her throat. "I want to talk about ghosts."

Her aunt didn't bat an eye. "A-ha!" She smiled. "So you ran into Gudrid the Viking maid up at the ruin? I rather hoped she'd show herself to you."

Hardwick sat forward, eager for her reply.

"No, I didn't see her." She sounded distracted. "What I really wanted to know was" – she paused, her fork poised over her baked beans – "if Uncle Mac had been a ghost when you met him, would you have still fallen in love with him?"

"What—?" Her aunt's eyes widened.

"Don't make me repeat it, please." She set down her fork, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I feel silly enough already. Just imagine Uncle Mac had been a ghost. Not a Casper-like ghost, but real-seeming. Like" – she bit her lip, clearly searching for words – "a flesh-and-blood man. A really gorgeous and sexy man."

Hardwick grinned.

She was talking about him. He knew it as sure as Bran of Barra's beard was red.

Her aunt angled her head, studying her through narrowed eyes. "A

ghost? Your Uncle Mac?"

"Yes." She nodded. "What would you have done?"

"Well…." Birdie MacGhee gazed out the window, appearing to consider. Then her face brightened. Turning back to her niece, she slapped the table with her hand, silver armbands jingling. "I'd have jumped his bones, my dear," she laughed. "No pun intended."

Hardwick looked from the older woman to Cilla, waiting for her response.

Her aunt was an ally, an unexpected boon. What a shame it didn't matter. He could have an army of such stalwarts and his purpose at Dunroamin wouldn't change. Even so, he leaned forward, his traitorous heart kicking up a notch, hope he daren't allow himself, making his pulse race.

"Aunt Birdie!" Cilla felt her face flame. "I was serious."

"So am I." Aunt Birdie sat back in her chair, nursing her soda water. "I was much younger than you when I met your uncle. And very romantic, adventurous and bold." She glanced aside, clearly reminiscing. "I'm sure I would have fallen for him, yes."

"Despite the impossibility of it?" Cilla remained skeptical.

"The *impossibility* of it – the romance - would have spurred me on." A dreamy look entered Aunt Birdie's eyes. "Remember, I'm the one your mother says is 'out with the fairies.' I would have hoped to find a spell or whatnot to make things work for us."

"I think you mean that."

"I do."

Looking wholly in her element, Aunt Birdie lifted an arm and examined the bangles on her wrist. "I'll prove it to you," she said, fingering one of them. "Once, well before I met Mac, I stayed in a lovely castle hotel near Edinburgh. It's now a luxurious tourist resort, yet preserved as one of Scotland's finest thirteenth century strongholds."

Cilla's heart skittered. She knew her aunt had more to tell, something important. "What happened?"

"Ah, well-" Aunt Birdie laughed, sat straighter in her chair. "I was given a suite in the oldest part of the castle, a wonderfully re-created medieval bedchamber deep in the castle's vaulted basement."

"You saw a ghost there?" Cilla pounced on the possibility.

Aunt Birdie's gaze went past her. "Let's just say that the castle's five hundred year old well was in my room." She looked back at Cilla. "It gave me certain ideas."

"Like what?"

Aunt Birdie studied her arm bangles again. "The well," she began, speaking slowly, "was in a corner of the room. For safety's sake, it'd

been fitted with a clear glass covering and an iron grill, but little spotlights shone into the shaft. You could look down into it, clear to the bottom where the water winked back up at you."

"You loved it." Cilla knew her aunt.

"More than that, it fascinated me." Aunt Birdie's voice went soft, distant. "Highlighted as the well was, combined with the room's period furnishings, made it more than easy to lie awake at night and imagine a dashing warrior knight climbing up out of the shaft to ravish me!"

Cilla smiled. "But one didn't."

"Sadly, no." Aunt Birdie shook her head. "But had such a gallant appeared, ghostly or otherwise, you can bet I would have considered his appearance a gift of the cosmos and taken full advantage."

"I think I believe you."

"You better." Aunt Birdie reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "Despite your uncle's blustering, there are things in this world that just can't be explained. That doesn't mean they aren't real." Her eyes started twinkling again. "And remember, this is-"

"Scotland," Cilla finished for her, "a magical land where such things just might happen."

"And do."

"Oh, Aunt Birdie, I-" a sudden burst of wind shook the nearby windows, splattering rain against the glass and through the opening onto the edge of their table.

"Goodness me!" Aunt Birdie leapt to her feet and carried her chair around to Cilla's side. "We'd best finish up and be on our way," she added, reaching for her plate. "I hadn't realized the weather was turning so quickly."

"I saw storm clouds earlier but forgot about them." Cilla spoke a half truth.

It was Hardwick who'd taken her mind off the weather.

Now, with the wind whistling around the eaves of the pub and rain pelting the walls, the magick moment had passed.

She'd have to wait for another opportunity to tell Aunt Birdie about her sexy ghost.

Her aunt might be receptive, but her mind was no longer on some romantic castle hotel and its medieval well. Now she was thinking about the long drive back to Dunroamin in the rainy dark and on slick, wet roads.

A journey made more hazardous by sheets of drifting mist.

"I can't believe it's so dark out there." Cilla glanced at the windows. Light from the hotel shone out into the road, but otherwise the world had turned a deep, thundery gray. "I thought-"

"It will pass." Aunt Birdie sounded confident. "As soon as the

storm blows over, the night sky will be as shining bright as always this time of year."

"Should we wait then? Maybe-"

A movement outside the window caught Cilla's attention and she snapped her mouth shut, blinked several times. She might be wrong – the sword and his shield were missing – but unless her eyes were fooling her, Hardwick stood outlined against the overcast night.

Seemingly oblivious to the rain and whirling mist, he leaned against the wall near the hotel entrance, his arms folded and his feet crossed at the ankles.

He was clearly waiting for someone.

She had a good idea who.

Her breath snagged and her heart started racing. Then she nearly jumped out of her skin when Aunt Birdie placed a hand on her shoulder. She hadn't even noticed her getting up.

"I think it's time." Her aunt smiled down at her.

Cilla's jaw almost slipped. But then she realized her aunt only meant the drive home. 'Out with the fairies' or not, Aunt Birdie wasn't a mind reader.

"Well?" Aunt Birdie stepped back, hitched the strap of her bag onto her shoulder. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." Cilla pushed to her feet before her knees could start knocking.

She *was* ready.

Aunt Birdie was right. Scotland was a magical place.

And some of that magick was about to happen to her.

She could just feel it.

Chapter Nine

"You're slipping, my friend."

Bran of Barra stood on the pavement outside the Ben Loyal Hotel and grinned at Hardwick. Then he whipped out his sword and, with a bit of a flourish, jabbed at the empty space where Hardwick's sword and shield should've been.

"You've manifested without your best pieces." Bran sheathed his blade and set his fists on his hips. "The lassie's addled your wits."

Hardwick frowned. "My best pieces are here, right enough."

All of them, he added. Naturally, to himself.

For Bran's benefit, he held up his hands and wriggled his fingers. Instantly, his trusty shield and brand appeared. "They are here if I need them."

He refrained from commenting on his wits. They did seem to be in a questionable state. Leaning back against the wall, he vanquished his sword and shield. Then he assumed the most casual stance he could muster.

He also damned his luck that he'd sifted himself out of the pub only to reappear in nearly the very same spot and instant that his Hebridean friend chose to manifest his great hunkering self.

The collision of their foreheads had been formidable.

Most annoying of all, the impact hadn't seemed to faze Bran.

His own head was splitting.

So much so that if the knave didn't stop grinning at him, he'd be sore pressed to challenge him to a bit of swordery on the edge of the nearest cliff. A plunge down a five hundred foot rock-face and into the cold, dark sea would dampen even a wild Islesman's humor.

Instead, he left his blade safely out of reach and tried another, equally effective tactic.

He smiled.

"So-o-o, Bran." He spoke as if they were in Seagrave's massive great hall, enjoying fine ale and finer women. "How is it you lost interest in Norse wenches so quickly? I didn't expect you back from Shetland for a good while." He deepened his smile. "Or did the bonnie northern maids snub their pretty noses at you?"

"You ken no' lass can resist me." Bran's grin turned annoyingly confident. "There wasn't an hour I was away when I didn't have a willing lass perched on each knee."

"Then why are you here?"

"You ask! The whole bleeding Lerwick town was astir." Bran's expression turned earnest. "I'd ne'er seen the like," he said, tossing a

flap of his plaid over his shoulder against the cold wind coming down off the hills. “Even the womenfolk were up in arms, carrying on like the men.”

He shook his head, pulled on his beard. “You’d think the world was coming to an end.”

“That bad?”

“Did I no’ say so?” Bran’s chin jutted.

“I have known you to stretch the truth.”

“No’ about suchlike.”

Even so, Hardwick folded his arms.

Glancing aside, he pretended interest in the mist-bank blotting the scatter of houses at the far end of the road. From somewhere closer by came the sharp tang of wood-smoke, welcome on the chill, damp air. He took a deep breath, waiting.

He knew better than to rush a Hebridean bent on sharing a juicy bit of blether.

“Quit doing as if you’re counting raindrops.” Bran’s face loomed in front of him, mere inches away. “I know you’re keen to hear what’s set all Shetland on its ear!”

Hardwick examined his knuckles. “You’ll tell me whether I wish to hear it or not.”

“Is that so?”

Hardwick tried to keep his lips from twitching.

Bran needed less than an eye-blink to detect the hidden smile, his rugged face splitting in another grin. “You great lump!” he roared, clapping Hardwick on the shoulder. “All these hundred years and still you get the better of me.”

“I’d say the score is about even, my friend.” Hardwick reached up to give Bran’s hand a squeeze. He wasn’t about to admit it, but he’d missed the lout.

Stepping back, he resumed his leaning-against-the-wall pose. “So what drove you from some sweet Norsewoman’s arms?”

“A raid!” Outrage swelled Bran’s voice. “The whole of Lerwick town is out for vengeance.”

Hardwick’s brows lifted. He could scarce believe it.

Bran’s bobbing head said that it was so.

“A raid?” Hardwick looked at his friend. “You’re certain?”

“Sure as I'm standing here.”

“Was there pillage, the burning of houses? Men put to the sword and women captured?”

Such was, after all, the old way of marauding.

“Nary a drop of blood was shed.” Bran huffed. “Nor was a single war cry given. It wasn’t that kind of raid.”

“What then?”

"They took things." Bran lowered his voice, glanced over his shoulder. "National treasures, Seagrave. All that's most dear to a Shetlander's heart."

"The women?" Hardwick could think of nothing else.

"Nae, you great loon!" Bran scowled at him. "'Twas far worse than that. They raided the Galley Shed, for the love o' Thor!"

Hardwick blinked. "The what?"

"Just what I said. The Galley Shed." Bran hooked his hands in his belt and rocked back on his heels. "Dinnae tell me you've forgotten the place. It's the great warehouse – *a shed* - where the good men of Lerwick build their Viking longboat each year. They-"

"Vikings?" Hardwick's brows arched.

"Up Helly Aa guizers!" Bran's voice boomed. "Braw, proud men taking care to uphold their Norse heritage by burning a galley at their fire festival each winter. Now their exhibition hall's been looted."

"The boat was stolen?"

"Nae, but I'll vow they only left it because it was too big to carry away." Bran paced a few steps, whirled back around. "The fiends took nigh all else they could get their hands on. If the town can't recover their losses, next year's Up Helly Aa will have to be cancelled."

Bran slapped his thigh, his eyes blazing. "Now you see why tempers are rising in the north! Blood calls when a Viking's wronged."

Hardwick understood.

Up Helly Aa *was* Shetland.

The festival with its firelit procession of costumed guizers and the burning of their dragon ship went back more than twelve hundred years. He and Bran had even attended a few such raucous celebrations together, in their earth lives and thereafter.

What he didn't understand was why Bran returned to Tongue rather than staying on to help the locals find the perpetrators of such a crime against tradition.

Eyeing him now, the truth hit Hardwick like an upturned pail of icy water.

It had to do with Dunroamin.

Hardwick started pacing, his kilt swinging about his knees. "I'd hear what was taken."

"The list is long." Bran paused to snort at the HIRE A HIGHLANDER placard beside the hotel door. "The journey from Shetland is tedious. I may need to refresh myself before-"

"You sifted yourself here the same as I did." Hardwick stopped pacing to glance at him. "It takes less than a wink. But here" – he snapped his fingers and produced a cup of heather ale, offering it to

his friend – "let no man say I'd deny a man his comforts."

Bran snatched the ale, quaffing it in one quick swig. "Ahhh…." He tossed aside the cup, laughing when it vanished before it hit the ground. "Where was I?"

"The Galley Shed."

"Aye, right." Bran drew his sleeve over his mouth. "Makes my blood boil, it does. The blackguards made off with the Guizer Jarl's entire Viking chieftain array and a good score of the other guizers' costumes. Horned and pointed helmets, mailed shirts, and woolen cloaks. Even a few fantasy disguises. Not to mention the swords, axes, and spears gone missing."

Hardwick narrowed his eyes. "That's why you came back, isn't it?"

Bran's face turned a faint pink. He glanced down, shuffled his big feet on the wet pavement. "I did the same as you would have, and we both know it."

"If you're thinking what I am – that the Viking ghosties at Dunroamin are men using Up Helly Aa costumes - we'll have to do something about it, and soon." He glanced at the hotel windows. Soft yellow light fell out onto the road. Golden and glowing like Cilla's hair. "I'll no' have the folks at Dunroamin set upon by a band of thieves."

Or worse.

His gut clenched at the possibilities. Already he'd seen how brazen the hell hags were behaving, cackling in the mist of shower steam and peering out at him through cracks in Castle Varrich's ruined walling. He was sure he'd seen a root dragon or two as well.

He knew he'd smelled one.

If aught happened to Cilla and he couldn't protect her, he'd never forgive himself.

"We'll get to the bottom of it." Bran sounded eager, his voice booming. "When we find the dredges, we'll hang them by their toes!"

"Must you yell when you're standing so close?" Hardwick rubbed his ear.

"That comes from living in the Hebrides. All those howling gales leave a soul no choice but to talk o'er them."

Hardwick couldn't argue with that.

He did need to get rid of his friend. Soon Cilla and her aunt would leave the hotel, and he'd rather be alone to greet them. Especially in light of Bran's tidings.

But the knave was leaning forward, fire in his eye. "Do you think *he* had a hand in any of this?"

"Who?"

"Him yonder!" Bran's sword appeared in his hand and he thrust its point at the placard by the door. "I ne'er did like that preening

peacock."

"Nor do I." Hardwick glanced at the poster. "But it's his belly-winding that makes my head sore. I don't think he has aught to do with Mac's troubles."

"He's here." Bran remained stubborn.

"He's come to give talks." Hardwick ignored his friend's indignation. "Take another look at his placard. He's calling himself the Highland Storyweaver these days. He's hauling adoring female admirers the length and breadth of the land. He'd no' ruin such a soft living by hieing himself up to Lerwick to steal Viking guises."

Bran's expression soured.

He kicked a pebble in the road. "I'll still be keeping an eye on the rascal."

"You'd do better to go rally your friends." Hardwick warmed to the idea. "We might need them," he added, hoping such a showing wouldn't be necessary. "I'll see to MacSporran."

Bran cocked a brow. "And I thought you'd been seeing to the Ameri-*cain*."

"Who?" Hardwick feigned ignorance.

"Hah!" Bran sent an exaggerated eye roll in the direction of the hotel's lit windows. "I saw you in there, lounging at a corner table and making moonie eyes at the lass. Saw you true as my name's MacNeil!"

"I wasn't making eyes at her." Hardwick gave his friend a cross look. "A red devil mask turned up at Dunroamin and also Castle Varrich when you were away. I thought it in the best interest of all to see what the ladies had to say about the matter."

Bran barked a laugh.

Hardwick didn't care.

It was no one's business but his own that he'd gone to Castle Varrich to get away from the lure of Cilla Swanner. The swells of her full, lush breasts, or the way her close-fitting hose drew a man's attention to her well-curved buttocks.

He scowled and swept a hand through his hair.

For sure, he wasn't going to tell Bran that he'd followed her to the hotel pub because her scent reminded him of bright spring days, sun-washed and smelling of new grass and budding flowers. Or, the gods preserve him, because he found the deep blue of her eyes irresistible.

"Best interest, eh?" Bran wasn't going to let it go.

"You err." Hardwick met the scoundrel's eye. "I had good reason for being in the pub. My efforts were rewarded."

"Whate'er you say." Bran shrugged. "Far be it from me to argue with a man in love."

Hardwick ignored the taunt. "I learned the name of the devil

mask's owner. If I heard rightly, the man is one Erlend Eggertson."

"By thunder!" Bran's eyes rounded. "That's a Shetland name if e'er I heard one!"

"So I'm thinking." Hardwick waited as an old man walking a dog hastened past. "Now you see why I've asked you to rally your men. If Erlend Eggertson's devil mask was stolen from the Galley Shed, it can only mean-"

"War!" Bran raised a balled fist, looking more than pleased at the prospect. "By the powers, I'm away to Barra! The scuttling fools will learn the price of trying to cozen an Islesman. Or" - he threw a meaningful glance at the pub windows – "those we hold dear."

Agreement flamed in Hardwick's heart. Before he could say so, his friend whipped out his blade. Thumping his broad chest with one hand and using the other to slash the air with his steel, he vanished in a swirl of plaid and Gaelic curses.

In the same moment, the hotel door swung open.

A bright wedge of golden light spilled out into the rain-misted night. Cilla and her aunt stepped outside. Hardwick made certain his blade and shield were invisible, then he squared his shoulders and strode from the shadows.

"Ladies." He bowed low. "A word, if you will..."

"Oh!" Cilla slammed into her aunt's back. Her jaw dropped, but she snapped it shut at once. Heat rushed through her, blazing hottest on her cheeks. She had the oddest sensation of the pavement dipping beneath her feet. She'd expected Hardwick to vanish again before she left the pub.

Yet there he stood, gorgeous as ever and looking even more corporeal than before.

Her heart did a quick flip, and then raced, beating in triple time.

He'd changed his appearance, leaving off his medieval trappings. Though still kilted, the kilt he now wore looked a bit rough, ragged around the edges. A khaki shirt, equally old-seeming, was unbuttoned just enough to reveal a tantalizing glimpse at his powerfully muscled chest. A dusting of black hairs glistened there, the sight of them doing funny things to her belly. Heavy work boots and thick, downturned socks leant to his ruggedness. A hint of sandalwood still clung to him, despite his modern-day garb.

Appreciation shivered through her. As other deeper, more exciting sensations.

If anything, he was more irresistible than before. She knew it was impossible, but she so wished she could turn back time, erasing years and centuries. Anything that would make him not just look so good, so real, but that would allow him to actually be a part of her world,

her life.

She knew Aunt Birdie trusted in Highland magick. Legends, myth, and lore, the widespread claim that time stands still in Scotland. That all things can happen there, especially in wild and remote places like Sutherland.

Cilla wanted to believe, too.

She slid a glance at her aunt, not daring to speak.

If Aunt Birdie was surprised, she'd recovered beautifully. Indeed, she was looking at him as if he were a long lost friend just returned from a journey.

"Of course!" Aunt Birdie flashed her brightest smile. "What can we do for you?"

All the charm of the Gael went into his own smile. "I am Seagrave. Sir- … *er* … Hardwin de-"

"Studley." Aunt Birdie didn't bat an eye.

She did toss a look at Cilla.

"I've heard you were about," she added, cool as a cucumber. "It's a great pleasure to meet you."

Cilla glanced from one to the other. It was clear her aunt recognized Hardwick. She obviously remembered Cilla mentioning his name in the pub. Likely, she'd seen him, which would explain her repeated glances to the menu board corner.

A corner where Cilla was sure he'd sat listening to much of their conversation.

If so, Aunt Birdie knew he was a ghost and not just any ghost, but the one that had caused her to ask how her aunt would have reacted if Uncle Mac had been a sexy, melt-your-bones ghost when they'd met.

The way Aunt Birdie was beaming proved it.

Hardwick's own smile was devastating. "Word is," he said, his deep Scots burr smooth and rich, "that you've been having difficulties at Dunroamin. That you've reason to believe prowlers are roaming your peat fields of a night. I'm here to offer my services."

"Your services?" Her aunt spoke without the slightest hesitation.

Hardwick nodded. "I've heard that your husband lacks men to cut his peat." He glanced in the direction of Dunroamin. "Sadly, I cannae be of help with the peat. I've come here to" – he cleared his throat – "recover from a longtime malady, and am no' able to do much physical labor. But I can spend my nights walking your moors."

"Like a security guard?" Cilla pushed a hair from her face, her heart still thumping.

He gave her a slow, easy smile. "I would watch o'er your uncle's peat hags, aye."

For the first time Aunt Birdie looked uncomfortable. "I can't say Mac would agree. Times are difficult and we" – she fingered the

fringed edge of her royal blue wrapper – "no longer have the-"

"Uncle Mac will come around." Cilla put a hand on her aunt's arm, certain her objection had more to do with worrying what Uncle Mac would say if he discovered Hardwick is a ghost than not having the funds to hire him.

"I have friends of Norse blood, my lady." Hardwick's voice rang deep, reassuring. "Even in the worst days of yore, many were simple farmers. Good men plied the seas as honest traders, dealing with merchants along the Baltic coasts and supplying much-needed goods to Viking settlers in distant Iceland and Greenland."

He paused, waiting until Aunt Birdie stopped fidgeting with her wrapper fringe.

"So you see" – he spoke with conviction – "it doesn't set well with me to learn there are souls who would guise themselves as my friends' more notorious forebears for the purpose of frightening others."

Aunt Birdie's head came up. "You've heard of our Viking ghosts?"

"I have."

"Running into them could be unpleasant." She glanced at Cilla. "Mac doesn't believe they're ghosts. They could be dangerous."

Hardwick eyes glittered in the light from the hotel entry. "I promise you, ladies, I also dinnae believe they're ghosts. Whoe'er they are and whate'er they're about, it will be dangerous for them when our paths cross."

Aunt Birdie considered. "Even so, we still-"

He cut her off with a raised hand. "Having done with them would be my pleasure. It's a matter of honor. And for that, I couldn't accept recompense. No Highlander worthy of the name would do so."

"Well..." Aunt Birdie considered. "If you put it that way-"

"I do." He took Aunt Birdie's hand, bringing it to his lips.

When he straightened, he turned to Cilla. For a moment, she thought she'd caught a glimmer of his sword belt slung low around his hips. The long, sheathed blade looking so right against his thigh, the brass studs of his shield flashing in the light from a passing car.

Crazy as it was, falling in love with him was something she could see herself doing.

Perhaps she already was, a little.

And who could blame her? Whether in medieval trappings or, as now, gorgeous in a sexy modern day kilt, he simply took her breath. Especially when his eyes seemed to heat and smolder as he kept his gaze locked on hers.

That he wanted to help Aunt Birdie and Uncle Mac made her heart hitch in an entirely different way.

"The troubles aren't good for Dunroamin." It was all she could think to say. "Any assistance in ending them would be so

appreciated."

"I will do what I can." He gave her another smile, one that he surely meant to be reassuring, but that also sent the sweetest, golden warmth spooling through her. "It could be" – her turned back to her aunt - "that a friend or two might join me on my nightly patrols. They, too, are Highlanders. Islesmen I've known for years."

"Your friends-" Cilla stopped herself before she blurted the obvious.

That his pals were likely ghosts.

"Aye, my friends." He didn't blink. "Good fighting men and sharp-eyed, they'd eat your Viking ghosts for breakfast and spit out the bones."

Aunt Birdie beamed.

"Then it's settled, barring Mac's objection." Her gaze flicked across the road to her car. "I'd offer you a lift to the castle now. I'd like you to speak to him. But there's not an inch of room in my car."

She hesitated, as if weighing her words. "Cilla climbed up to Castle Varrich's ruin this afternoon and she brought back a red-"

"Devil mask, I know-"

"But how…" Aunt Birdie blinked. Then her face cleared as quickly. "I should have known-"

"Of course, you should have." Cilla put a hand on her aunt's arm, improvising. "You're the one always going on about how well the gossip mill works in Highland Scotland."

She brushed a raindrop off her sleeve. Hopefully she'd spared Hardwick an awkward moment if he hadn't yet realized her aunt knew just who – and what – he was.

"I wouldn't be surprised if everyone above the Highland Line knows about the mask by now." She made a little hand flip to emphasize her point.

"You're right, of course." Aunt Birdie caught on. "Even the stones are said to have ears here, every clump of heather a pair of watching eyes. And" - she smiled at Hardwick – "each burn a wagging tongue."

"Word has spread, aye." He nodded wisely. "I have an idea who the mask's owner might be, or at least where to find him. I've an equally good notion about the origins of your Viking ghosts. Unfortunately" - he glanced at the lowering clouds – "standing here in the drizzle isn't the time and place-"

"You'll speak with Mac?" Aunt Birdie didn't make a second offer of a lift.

"That's my intention." His eyes went dark, almost fierce. "I'll visit him at the soonest."

Stepping back, he sketched another bow. *"Ladies."*

Then he turned and walked away. The silence of his heavy, steel-

shod boots on the pavement gave the only indication he wasn't a true flesh-and-blood man.

"How did you know?" Cilla spun to face her aunt the instant the night mist swallowed him.

Cilla pressed a hand to her breast, a whirl of emotion spinning inside her. "Can you believe it?" She stared at Aunt Birdie, amazed her voice didn't crack from shock. "He was here, speaking with us, and looking just as real as we do."

"My dear" – Aunt Birdie flipped the edge of her wrapper over her shoulder – "I've known he was about, at Dunroamin, since well before you arrived. I just didn't know who he was or his purpose until now."

"His purpose?"

"Why it's all about you, of course." Aunt Birdie spoke as if that made perfect sense.

"And Uncle Mac and his peat fields?" Cilla hurried after her aunt when she started for the car. "The men-dressing-up-as-ghosts or whatever. What about all that?"

"That'll be part of it, too." Aunt Birdie opened the car door – people in Tongue didn't lock their vehicles – and slid behind the wheel.

She waited until Cilla claimed the passenger seat and fastened her seatbelt. "It's this man's karma to meet you. Perhaps also to help us." Her voice took on a sage note. "I'm quite sure."

"How do you know he's the ghost you've been sensing at Dunroamin?" Cilla worried her lip. "Maybe you've picked up on Margaret MacDonald? The nursery spirit Honoria told me about? She sounded very protective."

"Margaret hasn't been at Dunroamin for years." Aunt Birdie made a dismissive gesture. "I'd feel her if she were. She left Dunroamin when your uncle passed out of his boyhood."

"But…"

"No buts, dear. You told me yourself who this man is. How significant he's become to you." Aunt Birdie backed out of the parking space, her eyes now on the road. "Have you forgotten you mentioned his name and estate in the pub?"

Cilla looked out the car window. Curling wisps of smoke rose from the chimney of a roadside cottage. Then they passed a cluster of sheep huddling near a drystone wall. The whole lot of the shaggy woolies lifted their heads to stare at her.

Deep, penetrating stares as if they knew how easily he'd scattered her wits.

Then the long causeway back across the Kyle loomed before them. But she took scarce note of how gray and white-capped the usually

sparkling blue water had gone.

"Aunt Birdie" - she glanced at her aunt – "we only talked about him. When you bumped into him as we left the hotel, he could have been anyone. Or did you see him in the pub?"

The slow curve of Aunt Birdie's lips was answer enough.

"I knew it! You did see him."

"You didn't?" Aunt Birdie shot her an amused glance. "He was at a back table in the Bistro Bar nearly the whole time we were there. My dear, I do believe he's quite enamored of you. He looked ready to eat you up with a spoon."

Ready to eat her.

The image of his dark head between her thighs flashed across Cilla's mind. Her belly clenched and a flood of tingly heat swept low. She fisted her hands in her lap, ignoring the sensations.

"He's quite handsome, isn't he?" Her aunt chattered on. "Can you imagine being kissed by such a man?"

She could. That was the problem.

She settled back in her seat, somehow keeping her nerves from unraveling. "Why didn't you tell me you could see him?"

"I was hoping you'd mention him first." Aunt Birdie flipped on the CD player. A lively pipe tune filled the car's interior. "Not that it matters now. Your young man has solved that particular hurdle for us."

"And the others?" Cilla lifted her voice above Uncle Mac's favorite pipe tune, "Paddy's Leather Breeches."

A short melody, the screaming pipes faded away quickly. But they started up again at once, the blaring tones even louder the second time.

Cilla's ears began to throb.

Aunt Birdie looked oblivious.

Even when the tune ended and started up a third time, once more louder than before.

"That's your uncle's doing." Aunt Birdie brimmed with amusement. "The CD plays that same tune over and over again. But-"

"You don't mind because you know how much Uncle Mac loves it."

"That's right. Seeing how his face lights when he hears it makes the listening worthwhile." Aunt Birdie swung into Dunroamin's long drive. "You see, my dear, when someone matters, when you love them more than life itself, living and breathing to see them happy, you look past things that others might find irritating."

"Or impossible." Cilla now knew why her aunt switched on the pipe music.

"That, too." Aunt Birdie slid a meaningful glance her way. "Where there's love there's always- good heavens!"

She slammed on the brakes.

Her eyes rounded. "What's Violet doing on a creepie in the middle of the garden?"

"A creepie?" Cilla's breath caught, shades of her window devil flashing across her mind.

Aunt Birdie flicked a finger towards the lawn. "The low, three-legged stool Violet is sitting on."

"Oh." Cilla leaned forward, peering through the mist until she spotted the tiny woman.

Just as Aunt Birdie said, Violet Manyweathers appeared to perch on an unusually low stool. Great swaths of fog swirled around her and she sat hunched over, her stooped back and all the mist giving her the look of a crone out of some ancient Celtic saga.

Cilla thought of one from a series of Scottish medieval romance novels she'd once read. A fearsome old bat called Devorgilla or something.

She shivered. "What's she doing?"

"I don't know, but she isn't alone." Aunt Birdie's gaze went past Violet to the clutch of residents gathered on the terrace outside Dunroamin's glass-walled conservatory. "Everyone but your uncle appears to be out in the rain with her."

Cilla glanced at the terrace. Gently illuminated by several mock gas lanterns, it was easy to make out the anxious-faced onlookers.

Aunt Birdie was right.

Uncle Mac wasn't there.

But before Cilla could puzzle why, Leo shot into view. Barking wildly, the dachshund streaked across the lawn, making for Violet. Reaching her, he ran circles around her, his short legs pumping at great speed.

Cilla's eyes flew wide. "He's really excited."

Aunt Birdie stared. "What the-"

"It's *him*!" Colonel Darling's voice pierced the chaos. "That bloody boxtie!"

Hurrying towards the car, he held his walking stick high in the air, waving it over his head as he ran. He used his other hand to hold his protective deerstalker hat clamped tight on his notably bald pate. His face, ruddy on the best of days, had taken on a purple hue.

"Oh, dear." Aunt Birdie tossed Cilla a here-comes-trouble look, then leapt from the car.

Cilla did the same.

"Achilles." Aunt Birdie reached to grasp the colonel's tweed-jacketed arms when he skidded to a halt in front of them. "What in the world is going on here?"

"I just told you!" He kept his cane whirling round his head. "It's

that damned bird."

"Gregor?" Aunt Birdie used her softest voice.

"Is there any other?" The colonel scowled and shook free of her grip.

Huffing, he brushed at his sleeves. "The abominable creature showed up on a library window ledge just as we were settling in for tea."

He sounded scandalized.

Aunt Birdie kept her cool. "Gregor often perches on windows."

"With red cord snagged all round his damty legs?" Colonel Darling's brows snapped together. "A shame the cord wasn't wrapped round his neck, I say!"

Aunt Birdie and Cilla exchanged looks.

"A red cord?" Aunt Birdie looked to where Violet still sat on her stool, her back bent near double. "Is that what she's doing? Untangling a cord?"

The colonel's face turned a deeper shade of purple. "Fool woman announced she had to save him. If she didn't, the bird might hurt himself." He leaned close, his silver mustache quivering. "Off she went into the rain and wind, the whole bleeding household trailing after her. I ask you, have you ever heard such nonsense? We'd be better off without that vile-"

Auk, auk!

Gregor's cry cut him off. Then the bird appeared, waddling away from Violet's stool with the awkward rolling steps used by so many great birds of prey on land.

Cilla recognized him at once. He was the big bird from Castle Varrich.

His cry, too, was unmistakable. As was the cheeky way he held his brown-feathered head.

The mentioned red cord was nowhere to be seen.

Blessedly, the bonxie's legs were free.

As if testing that freedom, Gregor took another few tottering steps and then turned around to fix Violet with a piercing stare. His white-patched wings shot upwards in a victorious V-shaped greeting.

Auk, auk, he screeched again.

Violet laughed delightedly. Pushing slowly to her feet, she clapped her hands.

On the terrace, a great cheer arose.

Achilles Darling huffed.

When the bird took flight, winging away toward the moors, the colonel lowered his walking stick and released his grip on his deerstalker hat.

Then his gaze fell on the interior of Aunt Birdie's car.

His eyes bulged, comprehension swift. “That’s the devil face Cook saw!” He yanked open the backseat door, peering inside. “And this” – he grabbed a long red cord dangling from one side of the mask – “is the same cording that was tangled round Gregor’s legs!”

“That would seem the way of it.” Aunt Birdie gave him her sunniest smile. “A riddle solved, yes.”

“Humph!” He stepped back, dusting his hands. “I knew that bird caused the uproar!”

“Perhaps it’s a good thing that he did.” Cilla kept her thoughts on her devil face to herself. “If he hadn’t found the mask, we’d never have known it was a mask. Behag Finney might have had nightmares for the rest of her life.”

Colonel Darling snorted. “If you asked me, I’d wager Gregor didn’t find the mask. I say he stole it!”

“Wherever he got it, Mac needs to hear about this.” Aunt Birdie started pulling the mask from her car. She glanced over her shoulder at the colonel. “Do you know where he is?”

“I do.” The colonel’s chest swelled with importance. “He’s in the armory with a kilted young Highlander who looks like he walked off the set of *Brigadoon*.”

Cilla’s heart slammed against her ribs. “He’s here already!”

Aunt Birdie’s face wreathed in a smile. “So he’s a man of his word.”

“Eh?” The colonel gave them both a narrowed-eyed look, but held his tongue.

Of course, Cilla wouldn’t have cared what he said.

She had other things on her mind. Delightfully reassuring things like her aunt’s vow that where there’s love, nothing is impossible.

Cilla couldn’t have agreed more.

Chapter Ten

A trace of sandalwood greeted Cilla the instant Aunt Birdie threw open Dunroamin's front door. A trill of excitement made her heart jump as they hurried into the castle's vast entry. Behind them, Leo's excited, high-pitched yips still resounded from the garden.

Glancing back, Cilla saw the little dog dash across the lawn, racing for the terrace. Violet Manyweathers followed at a slower pace. Colonel Darling trudged along after her, the three-legged creepie tucked beneath his arm.

Amazingly, Violet sported his deerstalker hat.

"Would you look at that?" Cilla grabbed her aunt's elbow, pulling her back to the door. "He gave Violet his hat."

Aunt Birdie laughed. "I told you he's all bluster." She shifted the devil mask on her hip. "He'll be worried Violet will catch a cold if she gets her head wet. Between us, I think he's a bit soft on her."

Cilla smiled and reached to turn up her jacket collar. Violet Manyweathers wasn't the only one in danger of getting drenched. Wind slung icy splitters of rain against the castle and across the stone of the outside steps.

A wet gust swept past them into the entry, lifting the edges of the tapestries and making a few of the standing suits of armor rattle in their wall niches. Aunt Birdie shoved at the heavy oaken door with her hip and Cilla rushed to help her, pushing with both hands. They strained against the wind until the door slammed shut with a bang.

"Wow, those have to be gale force winds." Cilla swept a hand through her hair, pushing it out of her eyes.

Then she frowned.

An aquatic chorus filled the air.

And it wasn't the rain lashing at the windows. The great din came from the dark passage leading away from the entry and deeper into the castle.

Drips, plinks, plonks, and – most alarming of all – the distant gush of running water.

"The roof leaks!" She flashed a horrified look at her aunt. "I didn't realize it was so bad."

Aunt Birdie glanced at the rain-streaked windows. "Only on such nights. As you can see" – she jerked her head at a plastic bucket near the silvered feet of one of the standing knights – "we're quite prepared."

A door on the other side of the entry flew open and Honoria sailed in, her arms lined with what looked to be dented and rusting milk

pails.

"We've used up our supply of drip-catchers." She didn't break stride as she hurried past. "I fetched these from the old byre. They should keep us dry!"

Then she was gone, her tweedy bulk nipping around a corner as quickly as she'd appeared. The ancient milking pails clinked in her wake.

Looking not at all put out, Aunt Birdie hitched the red devil mask against her hip again and started down the dimly-lit passage.

The one that echoed with the loudest drip-serenade.

"Aunt Birdie!" Cilla hastened after her, dodging trickles and weaving her way around the assorted buckets, pails, and cook pots lining the plaid-carpeted passage. "You can't live like this."

Her aunt stopped at once.

Turning around, she waited for Cilla to catch up with her.

"My dear, have you forgotten what I told you in the car?" She bent to adjust the placement of a large glass casserole dish so it better caught drips.

Straightening, she tucked her hair behind her ear. "Just as I love your uncle, so do I love his home. This" - she indicated the drip-containers – "will all pass when the time is right for it to do so. Until then, if need be, I'll sit on the floor and catch the water in my hands."

"You would, wouldn't you?"

The look on Aunt Birdie's face was answer enough.

It also put a hot swelling lump in Cilla's throat.

How wonderful to love so fiercely.

She swallowed hard, in the same moment catching another waft of sandalwood. Her breath caught and her heart did a double flip. She hadn't realized how deep into the passage they'd gone. The door to Uncle Mac's armory loomed right ahead of them.

Something told her that once she crossed the threshold, there'd be no going back.

Her Dunroamin waited within, and once she embraced it she had a feeling she'd be as ready as Aunt Birdie to listen to overloud pipe tunes and catch water drips in her hands.

There was only one way to find out.

So she took a deep breath and glanced at her aunt, reassured to see the older woman's encouraging nod.

Then – before she could change her mind – she put her hand on the door latch.

Her heart pounded harder.

The door swung open with ease.

"Ach, laddie!" Uncle Mac's mirth-filled voice boomed from across the weapon-hung room. "You're a man after my own heart. A pity it

is you've just now found your way here."

Cilla and her aunt exchanged glances.

Aunt Birdie hid a smile.

Cilla stared at her uncle and Hardwick, amazed by their apparent ease with each other. Both kilted and looking like two Celtic chieftains of old, they stood near the tatty tartan sofa placed halfway between the hearth and the room's row of tall, mullioned windows.

A flash of lightning silvered the leaded panes, lining their silhouettes against the rainy night.

Cilla's pulse leapt, a fierce jolt of excitement hitting her. Again, she imagined she glimpsed a sword at Hardwick's hip. The notion that he wore - and knew how to wield - such a proud and ancient weapon, weakened her knees.

Every wildly romantic, sword-swinging Highland-y film she'd ever seen flashed through her mind. She could see Hardwick in such a role, especially in the heated love scenes that often followed, with the hero riding off into the hills, his lady sitting astride behind him, arms wrapped tight around his powerful body, and her long, unbound hair flying as the streaked across the heather.

She drew a tight breath, wonder filling her. The kind of yearning she'd never have believed existed.

Now she knew.

And everything she'd ever thought to have understood about desire, about love, faded to nothing. Total insignificance, as she stared at the man she knew she couldn't have.

Not really, despite Aunt Birdie's optimism.

But, oh, how she wanted him.

Unaware they'd been disturbed, her uncle and Hardwick clinked dram glasses, sharing a manly moment. They didn't look around until – almost on its own - the door jerked from Cilla's grasp and fell shut with a loud click.

Hardwick's gaze snapped to hers. The air between them ignited, rippling and crackling as if ablaze. The power of it scorched her. His mouth curved in another of his slow, heart-melting smiles. As if he, too, felt the sizzling pull between them. Then his eyes went dark with a heated gaze that curled her toes.

"Oh, my." Cilla touched a hand to her cheek.

Aunt Birdie nudged her with an elbow. "That's it," she whispered. "The look I told you about."

"Ho!" Her uncle swung towards them. "About time you two returned."

"We ran into someone." Cilla's gaze stayed on Hardwick. Looking anywhere else was impossible. Even in the room's deep shadows, he dazzled her. "And he-"

She broke off, her chest tightening with almost painful awareness. She moistened her lips, her heart galloping. "We met someone," she repeated, forcing her attention on her uncle, not sure what Hardwick had told him. "We lost track-"

"We'd hoped to have dinner at the Ben Loyal's An Garbh restaurant, but they were full up." Aunt Birdie came to her rescue. "If we'd dined there as planned, we would've been much later."

"I know that fine." Uncle Mac hooked his thumbs in his kilt belt. "And I've heard all about how you met my young friend here." He rocked back on his heels, looking delighted. "Thanks to him - a Highland Shaw of the good Clan Chattan - I also know about Gregor's mask. It's been a grand e'en!"

He flashed a grin at Hardwick. "You'll ne'er believe who we just talked to!"

"Oh?" Aunt Birdie lifted a brow, slid a knowing glance at Cilla. "You might be surprised at what I believe."

Cilla stepped on her toe.

Hardwick – clearly the other half of her uncle's exuberant we – came forward to take the red devil mask from Aunt Birdie's arms.

Leaning close to Cilla, he dropped his gaze to her foot, pitching his voice for her ears alone. "He doesn't know. No' that."

Cilla's face warmed. She knew exactly what he meant.

His ghostdom.

Uncle Mac wasn't aware he'd been conversing with a ghost, a Highland bogle.

"Thank goodness," Cilla spoke just as softly. She also removed her foot from her aunt's, relief flooding her.

"Dinnae tell me you aren't curious?" Uncle Mac was staring at them, his bearded chin jutting.

"Of course, we're interested." Aunt Birdie went to sit on the sofa. "Who did you call?"

"Erlend Eggertson!"

Cilla had to smile at the triumph on her uncle's face.

"Erlend Eggertson?" She put a deliberate note of wonder in her voice. "That's amazing."

"Isn't it, just!" Uncle Mac's chest swelled.

He slid a glance at Hardwick. "There aren't many souls what can hide when two Highlanders put their heads together."

"How did you find him?" Cilla really wanted to know. "Aunt Birdie said there aren't any Eggertsons around here."

"So there aren't." Uncle Mac folded his arms, looking smug. "That didn't stop us from tracking him down."

"The man's in Lerwick. He's a guizer." Hardwick propped the mask against the wall. "I had a feeling we'd-"

"A geezer?" Cilla's eyes rounded.

"No, *guizer*." Aunt Birdie settled herself on the sofa. "There's a Guizer Jarl, the leader, and then" - she pulled a plaid cushion onto her lap – "his squad of attending guizers. There can be hundreds of them. I've seen their parades on BBC. They dress up as Vikings in celebration of Up Helly Aa, an ancient Norse fire festival."

She paused when a great crack of thunder shook the windows. "It's a thrilling spectacle." She continued when the rumbles faded. "They carry blazing torches through the streets and then burn a mock galley."

"And now they've been burgled!" Uncle Mac roared the words. "The Galley Shed – a sort of Up Helly Aa museum and warehouse combined – was raided some weeks ago. According to Eggertson, the thieves took scores of Viking costumes."

"Viking guises, weaponry, and" – Hardwick leaned back against a table and crossed his arms – "Eggertson's red devil garb."

"Including the mask." Cilla was beginning to understand.

Hardwick nodded.

Uncle Mac flashed a grin. "Little good it did them. We're onto them now."

Cilla considered. "If Eggertson is a guizer, and they dress like Vikings, what's he doing with a red devil costume?"

"They don't all parade as Vikings." Uncle Mac picked up an iron poker and started jabbing at the peats in the hearth. "Some of the men wear fantasy get-ups."

"But…" Aunt Birdie didn't sound satisfied. "How did you know to look for Eggertson in Shetland?"

"Tchach, that was easy enough." Uncle Mac set aside the poker and dusted his hands. "Besides Eggertson being a Norse name" – he glanced at Hardwick – "some might say providence is finally beginning to smile on us!"

Hardwick felt himself smiling, too.

He'd stopped believing in the benefices of providence many long years ago. But it did him good to see Mac MacGhee bursting with pride and confidence. If he could play any small role in catching whoever was sneaking about the moors at night dressed as Vikings, and doing the gods knew what kind of foolery, that was no small thing.

Mac was looking at him, his face alight. "Tell them."

Hardwick cleared his throat. "A friend recently returned from Lerwick. He mentioned the raid on the Galley Shed." He spoke the truth as he'd told it to Mac earlier, only leaving out that his friend happened to be a ghost. "In light of your troubles, I suspected a

connection."

Birdie MacGhee raised her brows. "Are you suggesting someone brought the Viking costumes here? That our nightly peat field prowlers are using them?"

"So we believe, aye!" Mac tossed down his malt, then dragged the back of his hand across his beard. "That'll be the way of it. I knew there weren't any real Viking ghosts spooking across my moors."

"I don't know..." His wife kneaded the cushion on her lap. "There is something going on. Don't you agree, Cilla?"

She looked across the room at Cilla.

"Well, lass?" Her uncle eyed her, too.

Cilla hesitated. "I'm not sure Gregor's red mask was the only devil spooking around here. I saw such a face outside my bedroom window. I think it was real."

"Pah!" Mac scowled. "What's going on here has nothing to do with ghosties and devils. No' real ones, anyway. That I know!"

"I know what I saw." Cilla folded her arms, looking determined. "It wasn't Gregor's mask."

Her uncle swung to Hardwick. "There's no such thing as bogles, eh, laddie? Red devil faces hovering outside a lassie's window?"

On the sofa, Aunt Birdie glanced aside.

Cilla looked at Hardwick, waiting.

He opted for tact. "I can't say as I've encountered any ghosts hereabouts."

That, at least, was true.

Excepting himself and Bran.

"You won't be. I guarantee it!" Mac stood tall in a most lairdly manner. "But – as we now know – you might run across a pack o' scoundrels dressing up as Viking ghosts."

"We cannae be sure who or what roams at night. Sutherland is an ancient place." Hardwick felt a need to defend Cilla, more disturbed than he cared to admit about her mention of a real red devil face. "Some say the veil between this world and the next is thin here. Others speak of portals, openings into different realms, the kingdoms of the fae. Truth is, there are things in these hills no living and breathing man should e'er encounter."

"Ho!" Mac slapped him on the back. "You've been breathing in too much peat smoke. My niece's imagination is as inflated as her aunt's! There's nothing spooking about here but those costumed loonies out on my moors."

"Why would anyone bother?" Cilla voiced the question that had been plaguing Hardwick for days. "It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe they want to steal my peat!" Mac aimed a fierce glare at the windows. "There's nothing else out there but heather, bracken,

and stones."

"What about our sheep?" His wife spoke quietly from the sofa. "Even if Dunroamin peat is superior, your business ventures with the Simmer Dim and Northern Mist distilleries are only now crystallizing. To date, our sheep turn a greater profit."

"What do you think Robbie and Roddie do every morn when they feed the wooly buggers?" Mac started pacing, his kilt swinging. "They count 'em, that's what! Our Viking ghosties haven't yet lifted a single one."

"They could yet." Birdie persisted.

"It's the peat, I tell you!" Mac threw her an outraged look. "But they won't be getting it."

He slung an arm around Hardwick's shoulders. "Not only will the moors be guarded at night, Hardwick has friends who might patrol with him." He drew a great breath then roared the last words. "Brawny lads with beards and kilts!"

Birdie MacGhee and her niece shared a knowing glance.

A telling one.

Heat shot up the back of Hardwick's neck. Apparently Birdie knew of his *condition* after all. Before he could worry about that unsettling bit of knowledge, Mac gave him a bone-crunching squeeze.

"Beards and kilts, did you hear?" He waggled his brows at the ladies. "There's no' a fake Viking ghost alive brave enough to withstand a Highland charge! Before they can shout Valhalla, we'll have 'em by their danglers. And that's not all the good news!"

Taking his arm from Hardwick's shoulder, he stamped across the room to a darkened corner. Bending, he snatched up a rusty milk pail. He returned clutching it before him.

Hardwick bit back a groan.

He knew what was coming.

Cilla looked on with interest, which only made it worse.

Proving Hardwick's dread, Mac waved the pail before his wife's nose. Water sloshed over the sides and onto the room's threadbare tartan carpet. Some also splashed onto Birdie's knees, but to her credit she said nothing, only peered up at him curiously.

Mac plunked down the brimming pail and jammed his hands on his hips. "Thanks to our new friend here" - he flashed a glance at Hardwick – "and the fine quality of our own Dunroamin peat, our days of roof leaks and drip buckets may soon come to an end."

"What?" Cilla and her aunt spoke together. "A new roof?"

"Sure as today and tomorrow are long!" Mac's beard jigged with pleasure. "Hardwick offered a suggestion that should bring us at least enough funds for a roof. If all goes well, we might even be able to tackle the unused wing."

"Ooooh." Again the ladies cried out in unison.

Birdie MacGhee's eyes began to glisten.

Worse, Cilla's lower lip was starting to quiver!

Mac hooted a great, belly-shaking laugh.

Hardwick struggled against the urge to throttle him. And to keep from cutting off his own flapping tongue so he wouldn't slide into such a pickle again.

Not that he begrudged Mac the money.

If indeed it came.

Indeed, if he had access to his own former riches, he'd gladly give Mac every last coin.

It was the way MacGhee was revealing the plan.

Oblivious to the harm he was about to cause, Mac rocked back on his heels, savoring the moment.

"Did he suggest other distilleries?" Cilla sounded hopeful. "Does he have contacts for you?"

"Aye, he does. Thousands of them!" Mac looked near to bursting. "Thousands of American women to buy Dunroamin peat!"

Cilla's eyes widened. "So many?"

Uncle Mac bobbed his head enthusiastically. "He says they swoon for anything Scottish, including our peat."

"I'm sure." Cilla folded her arms. "I like peat, too. And don't you, Aunt-"

"Let's hear what Mac has to say, dear." Birdie spoke over her.

Then she reached for her niece's hand and squeezed. "Go on, Mac." She nodded to him, one voice of reason in the cold, shadowy room.

"He's met all these women, see you?" Mac blundered on. "He says they bemoan not being able to smell peat smoke when they go home. So-o-o, he had the idea that we might export Dunroamin peat to America!"

"To his thousands of American women friends." Cilla spoke low.

"To any American who'll buy it!" Mac grinned. "But it was the women that gave him the idea. They're the most passionate. They loved-"

"I'm sure they did." Cilla glanced at the door and started edging that way.

Hardwick frowned.

Respect kept him from correcting Mac's interpretation of his peat-for-Americans suggestion. Nor did he wish to dampen the man's well-deserved pleasure in revealing the idea to his wife.

Dunroamin needed hope.

And he needed to get Cilla alone.

So he did a bit of lightning-quick sifting, putting himself between

her and the door before Mac and Birdie noticed he'd moved.

Cilla did.

She froze where she was, her back straight.

Hardwick swore beneath his breath. She looked like she'd swallowed a broomstick. He never would've believed she could compress such full, sensuous lips into such a hard, tight line.

She had, and seeing it killed him.

Again.

Lass. It isn't what you think. He willed her to hear him.

She arched one brow, indicating she had.

Hardwick started to relax. But then her back went even more rigid, and although she couldn't sift, she'd somehow managed to shoot past him and reach the door.

Ignoring him, she grabbed the latch and pulled.

Hardwick swore.

He threw a quick glance across the room. Mac stood with his back to him and was still blethering on about Americans and their great love of peat fires.

But Birdie was watching him.

To his surprise, she made a little flipping gesture with her fingers. She also mouthed the word 'go.'

Hardwick understood.

He whipped back around, but he was too late. The armory door stood ajar. Cilla was gone, the echo of her retreating footsteps all that remained.

For one ridiculous moment, he considered following her as a flesh-and-blood man would do. Hastening after her through Dunroamin's winding passages and then up the various stairs she needed to traverse to get to her room.

He could do all that.

But being a ghost did have a few advantages.

So he glanced at Birdie one last time, giving her an appreciative nod. Then he wished himself out of the armory and to the one place he knew Cilla would be so startled to see him, he'd have at least a few minutes to speak to her before she ordered him to go.

In a blink, he was there.

The only problem was, now that he'd materialized in her bed, he knew he'd want to be there again.

Just under different circumstances.

The thought hit him like a punch in the gut. Worse, it caused a pain deep in his chest. An ache that had nothing to do with the heated images flashing across his mind, and that stirred much more troublesome emotions – the kind he'd have sworn he wasn't capable of feeling.

Now he knew differently.
And that bode ill.

Chapter Eleven

Thousands of American women.

Cilla couldn't blot the words from her mind. She wished she hadn't heard them. But they whirled in her head, growing louder until she could hardly think. She could even see the women conjured by the words: a numberless crazy-for-Highlanders throng. And no matter how fast she hurried through Dunroamin's dim and dripping corridors, she couldn't outrun them.

They kept pace.

Jeering each time she almost knocked over a drip container or stubbed her toe on the incredibly hard stone of the ancient castle's tight-winding stairs.

Making it worse, the women weren't the only ones. Two Scots also chased her.

American-born Grant A. Hughes III, so proud of his supposed Scottish ancestry even if he couldn't trace it farther back than the New York tartan shop where he'd acquired his custom kilt.

And historian-cum-author-cum-tour guide, Wee Hughie MacSporran, also known as the Highland Storyweaver. If his enthusiastic pack of Australian groupies was any indication, he was an even greater skirt-chaser than Grant.

Cilla shuddered.

She'd had enough of such men.

Who would have thought she'd have to add a ghost to their tartaned, womanizing ranks?

Furious that it was so, she paused to press her side. It burned with a stitch she really didn't need. Keeping a hand to her ribs, she mounted a few more steps. Then she stopped again, this time on a little landing with two doors opening off it.

Leaning against the wall, she frowned.

She shouldn't care that she had to lump Hardwick in the same pot as Grant and his scribbling, tour-guiding Scottish counterpart.

She did care that she'd made a fool of herself.

Ghost or not, Hardwick surely knew why she'd dashed out of Uncle Mac's armory. Women didn't run from men they didn't care about.

It was a universal truth. One that made her face burn and her hands curl into fists.

She blew out a breath, trying to pretend she didn't feel like a white-hot vise had clamped around her chest, stealing her air. After Grant, she'd sworn to stand above such things. To never again fall so

hard for a man who wielded such power over her heart.

She closed her eyes, wishing she hadn't.

But it was too late.

She already cared about him. Hearing about his legions of women – Americans, no less – had been a blow behind the knees.

There was only one thing to do about it.

She should turn around, march back downstairs, waltz into the armory and plunk herself onto the sofa as if nothing had happened.

Then she'd lift her chin or examine her fingernails and casually announce that she ate too many mini-pretzels at the Ben Loyal's Bistro Bar. Everyone would believe her if she claimed the salt had made her stomach queasy. No one would lift a brow if they thought a roiling tummy had sent her flying from the room.

"Yeah, Swanner, go back down there. Save your face if you can't salvage your heart." She spoke to the door across the landing. Age-darkened and silent, it made a good listener. Unfortunately, she had the strangest feeling that the closed door was staring at her.

She blinked, her blood chilling.

The door might not be looking at her. But it was opening.

Creaking open in the way of all squeaky-hinged doors in centuries-old castles: slowly and with just enough weirdness to turn her legs to lead, freezing her to the spot.

Chills swept her and the fine hairs on her nape lifted. Until the door completed its slow, ear-grating arc to reveal a small oak-paneled chamber.

Dark and low-ceilinged, the room appeared empty except for a dressing-table and washstand. A dust cover protected something that might have been a chair. If a bed had ever graced the room, it was gone now. But the room did have two windows opposite the door.

Twin and narrow oblongs that looked out onto the Kyle, over which the moon now hung, its bright crescent just sailing out from behind a cloud. She could make out the black outline of Castle Varrich. High on its cliff, the ruin's crumbling window arch was bathed in silver and shadow.

She took a step closer, her gaze going through the open doorway to the windows where she half expected to see the devil face sweep into view. A thin rain fell, the droplets glistening on the ancient, rippled glass. Somewhere thunder rumbled, but what really caught her attention was that some of the lower panes were missing, allowing cold damp wind to pour into the room.

Wind that had surely caused the door to swing open.

Or so she thought until she noticed the woman in the room's darkest shadows.

Cilla pressed a hand to her lips, not wanting to release the gasp

rising inside her.

She did stare at the woman.

Tall, blond, and stately, she could have been Aunt Birdie except she was still in the armory. Even in younger years, Aunt Birdie had never worn her hair in a single, hip-length braid. She favored French twists or a fashionably knotted silken head scarf.

And although Aunt Birdie possessed a certain grace and style, she walked like everyone else. She didn't glide across rooms as if her feet didn't touch the floor.

Nor was it her habit to run around in ankle-length woolen gowns of deep red-purple, the seams edged in finest embroidery, the sleeves long and tight. A shawl of brilliant blue draped the woman's shoulders and a wide colorfully-patterned belt cinched her waist. If she wore any other adornments, Cilla couldn't see them.

The woman now stood at the windows, her back to the door.

Cilla knuckled her eyes.

It didn't help.

The ghost – for she could only be one – was still there. In the wink it'd taken Cilla to rub her eyes, the apparition had splayed a beringed hand against the rain-streaked window glass.

Sea-Strider.

The word – a name? – seemed to drift around the woman. As real as if she'd whispered it in Cilla's ear, the word held all the anguish of a woman who'd loved and lost.

Forgetting the fright the woman's sudden appearance had given her, her heart squeezed at the pain drenching the tiny dark-paneled room.

Very slowly, the woman turned her head and stared at her, her eyes beseeching. For a long moment she held Cilla's gaze, her lips moving silently before she looked back out at the dark, wet night. Her gaze, Cilla knew, was fixed on the ruin of Castle Varrich.

She had to be Aunt Birdie's Gudrid.

Though what she was doing at Dunroamin, Cilla couldn't guess.

Remembering her aunt's musings about the ghost, she sensed a big burly man near the woman. She could see him clearly. Unnoticed in a corner, he stared at the woman with great sad eyes. Bearded and fair as she, he wore a plain silver helm with a nose guard and a long mailed tunic. In one hand, he held a nine-foot spear. In the other, he clutched a large round shield, colorfully painted a rich dark blue and decorated with an interlace pattern of white, red, and green lines. Seeming to glow despite the shadows, the shield looked nearly double the size of Hardwick's.

Thinking of him, both images faded.

But not without leaving her with the impression they'd had something important to tell her. Regrettably, she hadn't been able to hear the woman's voice and the man hadn't even glanced her way, having eyes only for the woman.

Cilla pressed a hand to her breast, wishing she'd understood their message. She could only guess their names, Gudrid and Sea-Strider, before the little room's door inched shut again, blocking its secrets from view.

"Oh, man." Cilla rubbed her arms, chills all over her. She felt a strong urge to go back to the armory and real people, including Hardwick.

To her he was real.

She needed to settle things with him, one way or the other.

But the poor lighting in the stair tower struck her as even more dim than before. Deep shadows loomed everywhere and the night wind sounded eerie. Almost a wail, it whistled past the medieval arrow slits cut so deep into the walls. No way was she going down those stairs, into the darkness.

Her room was closer.

Hardwick would have to think what he wanted of her flight from the armory.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to deal with him.

First she needed a sound night's sleep. Maybe she'd even take a hot bath. She'd found that using the bath tub made it much easier to regulate the water temperature than risking the dodgy shower.

Then bed and a good book and she'd be fine.

Feeling better, she resisted another glance at the little room's door, now closed tight.

Instead she dashed up the remaining steps, then down the long corridor to her room. This passage didn't seem to have any drip buckets to run an obstacle course around. Or she'd just not seen them. A distinct possibility, as the old-fashioned wall sconces her uncle loved so much appeared to throw off less light than usual.

The passage was gloomy.

Except for the thin band of yellow showing beneath her closed door.

For a beat, chills whipped through her again. But they vanished quickly. The light had to be thanks to Honoria doing turn-down service. With the night's rainstorm, her room would've been really dark otherwise.

And she'd already pulled in her stubbed toe quota for the entire summer.

Light was good.

So she vowed to remember to thank the housekeeper for her

thoughtfulness, and opened the door.

She took three steps into the room and froze.

"What are you doing here?" She stared at Hardwick, heart in her throat.

"Waiting for you." He spoke from her bed.

Bold as brass, he lounged against the pillows piled against the headboard. He was staring right at her, his gaze narrowed, maybe even angry. He still looked hot, especially in her bed. Equally distressing, he'd drawn up one leg and although he'd clasped his hands around his knee, clearly arranging his kilt to try and hide certain things, she could still see them.

An errant kilt fold with a mind of its own had slipped, revealing him in all his impressive glory.

Her eyes widened. Even relaxed, he was formidable. Heat whipped through her and she could only stare, certain she'd never seen such a magnificent man. He made at least three of Grant, possibly even four.

"Oh, my..." She drew in a breath, but the air wouldn't go down her throat.

"Odin's balls!" Leaping off the bed, he brushed at his kilt, swatting it into place. "Dinnae worry, lass, I'm no' to pounce on you."

"I didn't say-"

"Your eyes did." He folded his arms, looking at her. "Such is the hazard of wearing a kilt."

"I know that." Cilla lifted her chin. "What I don't know is why you're here?"

"We need to talk."

"Oh?" She swallowed, her pulse still racing.

"Aye." He took a step toward her, definitely scowling. His dark eyes glinted in the dimly lit room, and his jaw was hard-set, revealing his annoyance. "You shouldn't have run out of the armory. I told you it wasn't what you thought."

"What wasn't?" Cilla brushed at her sleeve.

"You ken what I mean, lass." He saw right through her. "The thousands of American women. Your uncle misspoke what I'd told him."

"I wasn't feeling well." She went for a white lie, not about to admit the jolt of green that had stabbed her. "I ate too many mini-pretzels at the Ben Loy-"

"That's no' the reason." He shook his head, his gaze locked onto hers. "Just as I made it up here faster than you, so do I know you're spinning tales. And, nae, I canna read your mind.

"Centuries of experience allow me to spot an untruth the moment one is born." He looked at her with an expression that

could've been irritation, or possibly regret. "Most ghosts have the same ability unless they were dull-witted in life. Then they remain dim always."

"The same way a skirt-chaser remains woman-hungry?" Cilla couldn't stop the words. "I mean in their afterlife, of course."

"Bluidy hell!" He shoved a hand through his hair. "If I am hungry for any woman, it's you!" His burr deepened, his eyes taking on a dangerous light. "Since that cannae be, I wanted to ensure that you dinnae think poorly of me."

"Why would I do that?" Cilla's her heart started to hammer again. "You've kept me from hurting myself more than once now and" – she glanced aside, not wanting him to see the effect he had on her – "you stood up for me against Uncle Mac when he laughed about the devil face I saw."

She looked back at him, challenging. "The face did look real. I don't know why I'm telling you this, but I just saw two other ghosts. They were a Viking couple in a dark little room off one of the stair landings.

"Before I came here, they would've frightened me." She flipped back her hair, kept her chin raised. "Now I just felt sorry for them. I could feel their anguish – it steeped the air around them. Even so, it was a shock to see them."

She still felt hollow inside, their obvious plight driving home the pointlessness of falling in love with a ghost.

"They were not happy, I could tell." She hesitated, then shrugged. "It would seem Dunroamin attracts ghosts. Maybe they're everywhere, even out on Uncle Mac's moors."

Holding his gaze, she waited, not sure what he'd say.

He surprised her by closing the distance between them in several long strides and wrapping his arms around her, pulling her close against him.

"Sweet lass." He drew her head to his chest. "I'll no' deny that restless ones abound here. Sutherland draws such souls, so I'm no' surprised real Viking ghosts would visit Dunroamin. They'll have heard about the troubles and be upset by the furor, distressed by unsavory men impersonating them.

"Now, your devil face..." He tightened his arms around her, splaying his hands over her hips, his grip firm.

"Such creatures are another reason I'm here." He pulled back to look at her, his tone serious. "The fiend was surely looking for me, no' you. There's no reason for you to fear and I doubt you'll see the like again. Indeed, I'll make certain of it."

"How can you?"

"You'll have to trust me." He pulled her close again, nuzzled

his cheek against her hair. "I ken why they're here and can keep them at bay."

"The devil?" Cilla's chest went hot and tight, as if a giant hand had swooped down out of nowhere to squeeze the breath from her. "I didn't want to believe it. I can handle ghosts. They-"

She broke off, embarrassment sweeping her.

"Dinnae feel bad, sweeting." He stroked her back, his touch as welcome and warming as his rich, honeyed burr. "I'm no' offended. 'Tis what I am, after all. Naught can change that. And I'll no' have you worrying o'er things you shouldn't even know about."

Releasing her, he went to the hearth, resting one arm on the mantel. "As for the rest" – he gave her such an intense look that her heart caught – "my other reason for being here, I'll have you know that I am no' a skirt-chaser."

"I didn't say…" Cilla let the words tail off, her face flaming. "Oh, all right," she finally admitted. "I did think so. How could I not?"

"Indeed." He smiled.

Another of his slow and easy, curl-all-through-a-girl smiles that made her forget about red devil faces, Viking ghosts, and just about everything else except the sweet golden warmth spooling inside her.

It was a sensation that didn't have anything to do with her glimpse beneath his kilt and everything to do with the hard, steady thumping of her heart. The way the look in his eyes weakened her knees and set off butterflies in her belly.

She was falling in love with him.

"If you'd hear the truth," he said, something in his expression hinting that he knew, "I did tell your uncle that I knew 'thousands of Ameri-*cain* women' who would show interest in his peat. Aye, I've met those women. Though I'm sure they ne'er noticed me. I just happened to be where they were. So, of course, I heard them speaking."

"Where did you meet them then?"

"I have friends, see you? Ghostdom can get lonely and so we visit each other. Some of my oldest companions frequent Ravenscraig Castle near Oban. Its laird, Alex, is friendly toward us and so we often meet there."

Cilla's ears perked. She'd heard of Ravenscraig. "And the Americans?"

"They also visit the castle." He looked at her, his gaze level, his tone so earnest she had to believe him.

"One of Ravenscraig Castle's employees picked up at the Glasgow airport," she told him, remembering the friendly young Highlander with his shock of red hair. "His name was Malcolm and

he drove me to Lairg, where Uncle Mac met us."

"I am no' surprised." He gave her a little smile, just a slight tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Ameri-*cains* are aye greeted warmly by the folk at Ravenscraig. The Ravenscraig married an Ameri-*cain*. They turned the estate into a hotel and also run a place called One Cairn Village on the castle grounds. Every summer, Ameri-*cains* gather there in great numbers to research their-"

"Roots," Cilla finished, the mundane subject helping her gather her wits. "You mean genealogists. There are lots of Americans into their ancestry, but the ones of Scottish descent are the most dedicated."

He shrugged. "Whate'er they are, they come in droves. When they're here, they blether on, praising everything they love about Scotland. The castles and our mist and hills to our pipes, kilts, and accents, and, aye, our peat smoke."

Pushing away from the hearth, he started pacing. "Many of the visiting Ameri-cains mentioned Irish peat, claiming they procured it using the Internet, something I've heard of but wouldn't want to try and explain. The peat selling sounded like a venture that might benefit your uncle. Dunroamin's peat is of exceptional quality."

"Uncle Mac thinks so." Cilla was beginning to understand. "Obviously, he liked the idea."

"And well he should. I suspect he'll do fine with such an undertaking." He paused, a shadow crossing his face. "At the least, it's worth a try. It would be a shame if he lost Dunroamin. He holds his home dear."

"And your home? Seagrave?" Cilla didn't care for his tone, the way his eyes clouded. "You never speak-"

He made a dismissive gesture. "Seagrave is no more."

Cilla frowned, his tone twisting her heart. "I don't understand. Aunt Birdie said-"

"I heard." He went to the windows. "The walls of my home still stand, it is true. She also guessed the location rightly. The ruins are on Scotland's northeast coast, near the fine city of Aberdeen. Since my time, and much closer by, a small fishing village thrives not far from Seagrave's cliffs.

"Have you been back?"

"To Seagrave?" He rested a hand against the arch of one of the windows and looked out into the rain. "I glimpsed the fishing village from a distance once. It looked a fair place. But the shell that remains of Seagrave is no' the home I knew. I've no desire to return."

"When were you last there? Maybe now-"

"Leave be, lass." He turned and went back to the hearth where he stood staring at the fire. "Since my time new wings were added,

great monstrous things. Walls that had stood for centuries have been refaced and are no longer recognizable. Leastways no' to me."

"I am sorry." She was.

She wanted to help him, to say or do something to ease the pain that surely weighed on his heart. But words seemed hollow, and who could change the ravages of time? Or each through the impenetrable veil that stood between them.

She didn't know much about such things, but she was sure his ability to manifest and speak with her – to touch, and visit her – was the extent of reality.

A great gift, to be sure.

But not powerful enough to undo the past.

"It must be hard to have lost your home." Cilla's words reached Hardwick from across the room, her understanding balm to his soul. "I can't imagine the shock of seeing it so destroyed."

"So it was, aye." He kept his gaze on the hearth fire, his mind going back to the day Bran alerted him to the damage. "When I learned of it, my stomach churned for months. It was a bad time."

"I can see why you don't want to return." Cilla was at his side then, touching his plaid with light, tentative fingers.

He tensed, that one gentle caress spearing straight to his heart. It'd been too long, perhaps never, that a woman had touched him in kindness.

Lust, aye.

He'd had more than his fill of uninhibited, base urges. All thrashing limbs and panted cries, the crazed, searing heat that can consume a man until his release douses the flames, leaving him emptier than before.

He looked at Cilla, knowing she'd never leave him drained except in the sweetest of ways.

She'd fill a man's soul with gladness, giving him the kind of joy and satisfaction that lasted longer than a mere coupling, the slaking of carnal needs.

Pleasures he'd never know, and wished he didn't want so fiercely.

"I'm sorry I asked." She slipped her hand beneath the tartan swath of his plaid, her fingers seeking, so welcome and warm against his chest. "Uncle Mac really likes you," she said, sounding so pleased. "And you seem happy here, so why don't you just stay at Dunroamin?"

Hardwick's blood iced. "Because..."

He shut his eyes and drew a sharp breath. He'd love to stay at Dunroamin. Especially with her at his side, were such a miracle

possible. But he couldn't linger anywhere on this earthly plane.

Only at Dunroamin and so long as his testing time allowed.

A year and a day was all he had.

And it was a time he'd cut short if he could, knowing what the Dark One could do if he wearied of plaguing Hardwick with mere hell hags and root dragons. More than once he'd strode into the Dark One's inner sanctum, seeking a word with him, only to catch glimpses of beautiful naked women bound by their own hair to the temple's mist-shielded guardian trees.

Living, breathing women like Cilla, seized from this world at the Dark One's whim and then, when the Dark One tired of them, given to the root dragons for their own mauling pleasure.

Or equally horrifying, they'd find themselves tossed into the pit with the hell hags until the passing centuries turned them, too, into withered, flat-breasted crones.

It did happen.

He'd dive into that pit himself before he'd allow Cilla to land in its seething, sulfurous brine.

Steeling himself, he pushed her hand from his chest and stepped backwards, away from her touch. "I cannae stay at Dunroamin," he told her, his voice more harsh than he would have wished. "No' a day longer than allowed."

She blinked, staring at him like he'd grown horns.

He could've laughed at the irony.

Instead, he swiped an arm over his brow, not surprised to find it damp. His heart was about to burst from his chest, so fiercely was it pounding with dread.

Concern for her – worries he didn't want to share with her.

"Why did you do that?" She stepped close, frowning.

It was her stubborn frown, the kind that wouldn't go away unless she received the truth for an answer.

Hardwick scowled, too. He also stepped back again, this time putting a good two stride-lengths between them.

She folded her arms. "Well?"

He blew out a breath. "I wanted, no, I had to get away from your touch."

"Why?" She pinned him with a look, clearly not satisfied with his answer. "I know you want me."

He almost choked.

He did wince. Wanting her didn't begin to describe it.

"Did you ne'er wonder why I aye wear my kilt?" He knew the words sounded pointless, but he just couldn't come right out with the truth.

Her eyes narrowed, just as he'd known they would. "I don't

see what that has to do with it."

"Och, it has everything to do with it." He ran a hand through his hair, searching for the right words. "See you, there are things a man notices more swiftly if he's kilted." He looked at her, waiting for comprehension to flicker across her face.

Nothing happened.

She only peered at him, her face an innocent blank.

"Ach, lass." This time he rammed both hands through his hair.

He'd have to be blunt.

He cleared his throat. "A kilt allows for an easy swing," he said, rushing the words. "That freedom means a man notices unwanted stirrings almost before they happen."

Her eyes rounded. "You're talking about arousal, aren't you? When a man gets-"

"Aye, just so." He nodded.

Her face bloomed pink. "You're saying that you, that I-"

"I'm telling you there's a reason I almost kissed you a few times and didn't." Going back to her, he gripped her arms. "I broke away from your touch a moment ago because I had to, no' because I wished to."

He risked a quick kiss to her brow. "You cause stirrings in me that I've ne'er felt for any woman. Aye, I mean the urges you think. But there are other feelings. Deep ones I've no right to-"

"Oh!" She flung her arms around his neck. "You should've told me," she cried, peering up at him with shining eyes.

She smiled, hope all over her. "It doesn't matter that you're a ghost," she said, clearly not understanding. "You're as real and solid as any man. You can touch me and I-"

"Nae." He shook his head. "We cannae touch."

Her face fell. "But-"

He reached up and circled her wrists, lifting her arms from his shoulders. "If my ghostly status were the only difficulty, we could. I have seen one or two such relationships prosper. But our situation is different. Our meeting came too late."

Her chin shot up. "If meeting you as a ghost isn't too late, how can anything else be?"

"My life, such as it is, is no longer my own." He waited a beat, hating what came next. "I bargained it away to the Dark One in exchange for eternal peace."

"Eternal peace?" She stared at him. "Isn't that what you found when you became a ghost?"

"Nae." He shook his head, slowly. "I havenae known a moment's peace since the day. Leastways no' until I came to Dunroamin."

She bit her lip. "If you bartered away your existence, how can you be here?"

"Because," he began, "the Dark One doesn't grant bids without stipulations."

"And yours was not to touch a woman?"

"Something very like that, aye."

Her eyes narrowed. "I see."

"Nae, you dinnae." He grasped her chin when she started to glance away. "You're thinking of Mac and his thousands of Ameri-*cains*."

She flushed. "They do come to mind."

"Grant A. Hughes III comes to my mind and I'd love to cross blades with the man. He deserves a few cuts and bruises to teach him ne'er to treat a woman so shabbily again."

She puffed a hair off her forehead. "You're changing the subject."

"Nae, I'm leading into it."

"Oh?" Her eyes were starting to glitter.

Damning himself for being the cause, he steeled himself against how much he wanted her. Then he reached for her, pulling her into his arms.

"I am no' that man, Cilla. Nor any other who might have hurt you." He spoke gently, laying bare his heart. "But I did have my share of women in my time. I lived no differently than other men of my position. Being unmarried, I saw no harm in enjoying myself."

She stiffened but made no move to pull away, so he continued.

"My hall was a merry place and visitors came to Seagrave from far and wide." He paused, bile beginning to rise at what was coming. "At times, great nobles and their entourages called, often visiting for weeks. It was during the stay of such high-born guests that my troubles began."

"What did they do?"

"They didn't do aught." He could see them still. How they'd lined his high table, wine chalices raised in good cheer. "They were fine men."

"If they were good, what happened?"

"They had bitter foes." He tightened his arms around her, remembering. "A wandering lute player had been trailing them for days when they arrived at Seagrave. We'd had it on good authority that this man was a paid assassin. When, a few days into their stay, such a man appeared at my gates, I turned him away."

"What else could you have done?" She pulled back to look at him.

"I could have welcomed him to my hearthside, offering a warm

pallet and hearty viands for as long as he wished a bed. Such was the custom." He released her and moved to the windows, needing air. "I violated the ancient code of hospitality. Unfortunately, I unwittingly did so to a man who was no' only a minstrel but a powerful wizard."

"He cursed you." She spoke at his elbow.

"He did." He turned to face her. "It was to seek relief from his curse that sent me to the Dark One."

"And he banished you here?" A glimmer of hope lit her eyes.

"Nae," he said, dashing that hope. "I chose Dunroamin on my own. It seemed the best place for me to spend my proving period."

She blinked. "Your what?"

"My testing time." He drew a long breath. "The Dark One agreed to grant me an end to the minstrel's curse and the eternal peace I desired only if I could spend a year and a day without becoming aroused by a woman."

"I see." This time she did. "You thought Dunroamin would be free of such distractions."

"That was the way of it, aye."

"Then I arrived."

"Aye, and what an entrance you made." He smiled, unable to stop himself. "I would no' have missed you, lass. No' for anything."

"So what happens if you, if we-"

"If I let my feelings for you run full course?"

"That, too, but I meant what if you fight it?" She stood straighter then, her chin lifting. "We have a saying in my world that two heads are better than one. Maybe two hearts are more powerful than a single wizard?"

"Such druids wielded great magick." Hardwick looked at her, unable to lie.

She hadn't yet asked what his curse was. For sure, he wasn't keen to tell her. But her willingness to stand by him did something to him that he'd never thought would happen. She'd snared his heart. A cold, stony, tightness in his chest began to ease, unfurling to sweep him with the most wondrous joy.

However ill-fated, no matter much it would crush him to let her go…

He was falling in love.

And the longer he looked at her, seeing so much hope and confidence lighting her eyes, the easier it became for him to hope, too.

Two hearts where before there'd only been one.

He did like the notion.

Better yet, it just might make a difference.

Chapter Twelve

Cilla knew the minute she'd won.

Relief swept her and she drew a deep breath, trying to stay calm. She could so easily toss back her hair and pump a fist in the air. Maybe whoop with triumph or try her luck at one of Uncle Mac's whirling, fast-footed jigs.

Hardwick was hers.

He stood watching her, his dark eyes smoldering with a heat that confirmed it. If she didn't want to push her luck, she'd march over to him, grab his plaid and pull his head down to hers, kissing his kilt right off him.

She'd do a lot more.

Maybe seize his face and hold tight, gentling her lips back and forth over his until he couldn't take it anymore and yanked her hard against him, demanding deeper and hotter kisses. She'd tease him with her tongue, making him crazy as he swept his hands up and down her body revealing that he needed intimate contact with each and every inch of her.

She shivered, wondering what he'd do if she maneuvered him onto a chair and then yanked up his kilt so she could swing one leg over him and then settle onto his naked lap, riding his rock-hard thighs and, hopefully soon, something even more granite-like.

At the least, she was sure that the next time he made an attempt to kiss her, he'd follow through. And with much more than deep, soul-searing kisses, full of tongue, breath, and silky-hot sighs.

But first they needed to do something about whatever curse the bard had cast over him. She couldn't let that go. Not so long as her name was Swanner and she had fine, strong Philadelphia, Pennsylvania blood coursing through her veins.

Philly women were strong.

They powered on, always. She wasn't going to be the first to tarnish that proud tradition.

She already had ideas about how they could break his curse. So she rubbed her hands together, determined to convince him.

He'd taken up his usual stance at the hearth, legs crossed at the ankles and one arm hooked on the mantel. His gaze held hers, his rock-solid, male body glowed in the firelight, and the black silk of his hair glistened like a raven's wing. The sheer masculine beauty of him almost overwhelmed her.

There was just something about a man in a kilt. A smile from a kilted Highlander, and a girl's knees turned to water. If he then

kissed her, she was a goner.

Cilla swallowed, pure female want welling inside her until she could hardly breathe.

Unfortunately, he didn't appear to share her excitement. His lack of enthusiasm caused something to twist inside her. Her heart skittered. There had to be a way to make him believe that together they could meet any challenge. She bit her lip, considering. She'd seen the quick burst of hope that had flared in his eyes when she'd shared her two hearts analogy.

He was interested in the possibilities.

He just didn't trust in them.

"You're skeptical." She opted for bluntness. "If I would be, too. But I can assure you that" – she placed a hand over her heart – "I know something of curses. These are different times than yours. People are more open. They share information about all kinds of things. Including how to break a-"

"My curse doesn't need to be broken."

"I've read about such things." She spoke over him, warming to the topic. "There are books on everything from the evil eye and spells to the effects of negative energy. Just as curses are known to exist, so are there ways to block or lift them. White candles and sea salt come to mind. For a fee, some people will even come and-"

She snapped her mouth shut, staring at him. "What did you say?"

"Just now?"

"Yes." She hoped she didn't sound worried. "You said your curse doesn't need breaking. How can that be?"

"Because" – he spoke softly – "my curse already has been broken."

"What?" She blinked. "I don't understand."

He tensed visibly. "The Dark One lifted the curse before I came here. I now I have other difficulties to contend with, as I've explained."

"You mean about having to stay uninterested in women for a year and a day?"

"That is the way of it, aye." He left the hearth to stand at the windows. As before, he braced a hand on the carved stone of the window arch and stared out at the darkness.

"It's a strange stipulation." Cilla persisted. "Maybe you should tell me what the curse was?"

He frowned.

Even though he stood half-turned away from her, she could tell.

She joined him at the window, ready to prod even though the

stiff set of his shoulders and the dark look on his face warned her to leave him in peace.

"You dinnae want to hear about the curse, lass." His voice sounded final. "The tale isn't fit for your ears."

"I think I'd like to decide that." She wanted to reach out and hold him, but she knew he wouldn't appreciate her embrace. Not now. "There isn't much that shocks me."

He shot her an annoyed glance.

She folded her arms. "If you won't speak of it, maybe I should? Let's take this testing time, for instance. Why such an odd penance? There must have been a reason."

He turned his gaze back on the window, apparently determined not to look at her.

In case he did, she pretended to inspect a loose thread on her sleeve. "Did you know," she began, plucking at the thread, "that in my country, we say that where there's smoke, there's fire."

"And I say that those who jab sticks into wasps' nests get stung."

"Be that as it may" – she kept examining the thread – "I am not a wasp."

"Then be satisfied to know that my penance wasn't wholly unjust." He turned to face her. "Truth be told, it was more than fitting. The minstrel's curse demanded that the Dark One require me to spend my proving time as he did."

Cilla frowned. "So the curse had something to do with women?"

Now she knew why he didn't want to tell her.

"Whatever happened is long over." She was surprised by how easily the words passed her lips. "The now is all that matters."

Hardwick still didn't speak. The truth, for she deserved nothing less, sat like a clump of granite in his gut. Equally annoying, his head was beginning to ache.

He gave her a tight smile, the best he could do. "Leave be, sweeting."

"No." She stepped closer and put a hand on his arm, her touch warming him.

Her persistence and caring made his heart pound. He wasn't sure any woman had ever shown him compassion. Lust, aye. But not heartfelt concern and he wasn't sure he knew how to accept such goodness.

He did know he shouldn't.

And more for her than him – she deserved better.

"I want to hear what happened." She looked at him, her gaze

clear, ready.

Innocent.

He lifted a hand and slid his thumb over her lips, needing to touch her. "You guessed rightly, lass. The curse had to do with women." He spoke true, already seeing the edges of his world curl and blacken. "Topping his outrage that I'd shut my door in his venerable face, the bard-wizard envied my supposed renown with the fairer sex."

She took a slow breath. "So you were a ladies' man."

"Aye, and so I was, though no more than any other man of my station." He paused, remembering. "The bard saw it otherwise and, once riled, took punishment on me in a way he knew would forever ruin my pleasure in women."

Her eyes rounded. "He ruined your ability to- … ah … you know, *enjoy* yourself?"

"Nae, the opposite." He forced himself to hold her gaze. "He cursed me to be in a permanently aroused state, damning me to pleasure a different female every night for all eternity."

"What-"

He raised a hand, silencing her when she tried to speak. "The dalliances weren't a pleasure. Leastways" – he wouldn't lie – "no' after the first fifty years or so. Thereafter, what should have been bliss turned into a living, or un-living, nightmare."

She paled slightly. "I see."

"You must." He gripped her arms, guilt ripping him. She looked so frozen. "I couldnae go on, sweet. My weariness of the task is why I asked the Dark One to relieve me of the curse. His required payment is why I am now unable to touch or kiss you as I would so love to do."

"I thought you were weary of women?"

"I believed I was." He tightened his hold on her, his heart hammering at the admission he was about to make. "After so many centuries, so many nameless, faceless women, I'd come to think eating an ash dinner each night would suit me better. Until the day I decided to relieve my boredom by sifting myself about Dunroamin and you happened to enter a room I'd just arrived in."

"You hid in the poster." A smile tugged at her lips. "I thought you were a symptom of my jetlag."

The word came as a jolt, a reminder of the vast differences between them. But the long centuries of guarding his bed had taught him much, including the strangeness of her world and the wonders it held.

So he didn't blink, just slid his arms around her, pulling her close. "And I thought I'd wakened from a seven-hundred-year sleep.

You took my breath, lass."

She drew back to look at him. "Even after so many other women?"

"Especially because of them." It was a truth that didn't surprise him in the least.

The endless parade of lovers hadn't brought him one woman he ached to see again. There wasn't a woman amongst them who'd made his heart beast faster. Cilla had done that and more, making him want him in ways he'd never have believed he could come to care for a woman.

Yet he did for her, and it both humbled and terrified him.

He wanted to court her rightly, to claim not just her beautiful well-made body, her golden hair and sapphire eyes, but to possess her heart and soul.

All of her, if only he could.

"But…" She glanced aside, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

He cupped her chin, turning her to face him. "I speak true, lass."

"Oh, I believe you." She met his gaze, her eyes clear and shining. "It's just a great deal to consider. Having to believe you're a ghost, solid and real as you are. Now-"

"You've accepted my ghostdom." *And I thank the gods that is so.*

"How could I not, after all I've seen?"

"Then accept me as a man." He looked at her deeply, willing her to do so.

"I do," she said, not even hesitating.

Hope flashed through him, and he was scarce able to believe it. Half afraid he might say something that would change her acceptance, her willingness to trust him. Undo the joy that, despite all, he was able to touch and feel her. The softness of her skin, the pliant warmth of her curves, the sweetness of her smile. He couldn't bear to lose any of that, not now.

So before the world tilted and tipped him off its edge, he prayed to whatever powers might aid him.

He didn't want to slip back into the empty dark he'd dwelt in for so many uncountable years.

There was no going back. Not even if he could never truly make her his. He could pleasure her in other ways. He'd seen how responsive she was to passion.

He'd ignore his own.

She was balm to his needy soul, and more than enough for him.

He only hoped she'd feel the same.

"See you, lass" - he considered his words - "I did enjoy the women I encountered in the early days of my cursed state, but I cannae recall the name or face of a single one of them."

"You don't have to tell me this." Her cheeks bloomed pink, but she didn't glance aside.

"I believe I must." He smoothed his knuckles down her cheek, hoping to soothe her. "You need to know. The ladies who crossed my path in the centuries between then and now are naught but a great blur."

She blinked. "A blur?"

He nodded. "I can think of no other way to describe them. But I'll no' lie. They were good lasses, passionate and generous. But my heart was no' given to them, nor did they desire mine. It was only about…" He tailed off, knowing she'd understand. "Since meeting you, my time with them is as if it ne'er happened. They are no' even a faint beat in my memory."

"And me?" Her voice caught. "Where do I fit in with all those others?"

"You stand above them like the brightest star in the heavens. You are the sweet golden light I didn't know I was missing." He looked at her, his heart bursting. "The honeyed warmth I ne'er knew existed, even in my earth life. You may no' be the first woman I've drawn into my arms, but you are the only one I've given my heart."

"Oh…" She twined her arms around his neck, melting into him. "I think you are a bard as well, or maybe a warrior poet? No one has ever said anything like that to me."

"You should hear such words every day." He cradled her face, his heart thundering. *You should be loved every day, cherished above all else.* "The women before you are of no importance. They went on to spend their lives with the men meant for them. What matters is that you are the woman I would love to see as my last, with no one coming after you. If" – he had to tell her – "we are able to find a way to undo my pact with the Dark One."

She pulled back, her eyes rounding again. "What do you mean your pact with the Dark One?"

"Exactly that." The truth lanced him.

He had no choice but to tell her. "Once a year and a day rolls around and I have remained unaroused, I will be granted the eternal sleep I requested."

She paled. "You mean a different kind of ghostdom than you're living now?"

"It will be no ghostdom or afterlife at all." He tried to explain. "There are many layers to the Otherworld, see you? I asked

the Dark One to send me into a deep, black sleep from which there is no waking. He agreed."

He looked at her, wishing he could turn back time and undo his request.

"That's horrible." Her face clouded. She fisted her hands against his shoulders and he caught the tremors rippling through her.

"Such was my own desire. I only wanted relief. A way out of a curse I could bear no more." He touched her hair, regret spearing him. "Would that I had known I'd meet you."

She moistened her lips. "So this forever sleep will claim you if you get through the proving period without becoming aroused?"

"That is the way of it, aye."

"Then I have it!" She brightened. "I know what we need to do to save you."

"I cannae be saved, lass." He spoke plain, his gaze locked on hers. "The Dark One is all-powerful and holds a soul to his bids. He makes no exceptions."

"But that's excellent." She beamed. "We want him to keep his word."

"Och, he does, to be sure."

"That's perfect! Don't you see?" Her voice rose. "We only need to get you excited and the pact with him is null and void. He can't whisk you off into some deep, dark oblivion."

"It is no' so easy." He shook his head, hating that he had to dash her hope. "I did no' explain the testing period well enough."

Her face fell. "There's more?"

"The most damning part, aye."

"Tell me."

"If I allow myself to desire a woman, in the fullest sense" – he spoke quickly – "the proving period will end immediately."

Her eyes narrowed. "Meaning?"

"Should the like happen, the druid's curse will return at once." He reached for her arms, lowering them from his neck. "Only this time I will no' have the freedom to roam the world at will and choose my own partners for each night's required bedding. The Dark One would whisk me into the coldest corner of hell, leaving me to pleasure the hags who dwell there."

To his surprise, her chin came up. "And if we refuse to accept that?"

He blinked, not sure he'd heard her.

She laid a hand on his arm. "We can just go on as we are, can't we?"

Hardwick almost choked. To be sure he wanted what she suggested. The notion rode him day and night. But he'd never been a

man to build his castles of clouds. Truth was, he doubted he could continue this way much longer. He wanted her as a starving man craves food.

He was more than close to overstepping himself.

But her touch and the hope in her eyes made it impossible to deny her. As did his own burning desire to make such a foolhardy, shaky-footed proposition work.

He started to scowl at the improbability of it, but slung an arm around her instead, pulling her close. "Aye, sweet, we can keep on as we are."

For the now, he added in silence.

A good while later, in the smallest hours of the night, Hardwick stood just inside the bolted door to Dunroamin's unused wing and tried his best not to sneeze. Damp and musty, the chill, seldom-seen rooms reeked of dust, old leather, and moldy books. With surety there were a few other smells he couldn't identify.

Molting stags' heads, ancient stuffed birds, and faint traces of candle wax were reasonable guesses.

Blessedly, he couldn't detect the slightest tinge of dragon breath. Nor did he catch any subtle wafts of sulfur or the unpleasantly sharp-sweet odor of hell hag. Not that he was presently in a state likely to attract his heinous watchers.

At the moment, coupling – even with Cilla – was the last thing on his mind.

Even so, he frowned.

His brow furrowed even more when a small four-footed something scuttled out of a shadowed corner and darted across the uneven wood-planked floor. Tiny legs pumping, the wee creature disappeared into the unsavory-smelling blackness beneath a torn and tattered armchair.

As if, like him, the mouse wanted nothing to do with dark and dust-coated places, he reappeared in a wink. He took a few cautious steps forward and then sat up on his haunches, fixing Hardwick with a curious stare.

The wee beastie didn't appear frightened of him, as some creatures were wont to do. Far from it, the mouse angled his head jauntily.

His cheeky perusal made Hardwick's heart clutch.

Any other time, he would have smiled.

As things were, he flicked his fingers to conjure a fine morsel of cheese. This he threw to the teeny, bright-eyed mouse. Snatching

it, the beastie scampered behind a cracked gilt mirror propped against a wall.

Feeling an odd tightness in his chest, Hardwick placed his hands on his hips and looked around. He took care not to breathe too deeply. While not quite malodorous, the air held enough piquancy to twitch a sensitive nose.

And - as he'd only now just learned - it would seem his nose was quite discerning.

His heart, too, the gods preserve him.

He swallowed a sigh.

Now wasn't the hour to dwell on such revelations. He was here for a reason, and an important one. So he moved deeper into the dingy passageway, taking care to peer into each open door and shadowed niche. Dark, dreary, and filled with indistinguishable clutter, these less frequented rooms and deliberately hidden corners beckoned with treasures.

In particular, the room he knew to be filled with bolts of ancient tartan. He'd seen the room once and meant to find it again now.

His pulse leapt at the prospect.

He quickened his step, his expression purposeful.

He needed the tartan.

To that end, he nipped into the dimness of a promising room only to walk straight into the pointed corner of a dark oak table.

"Odin's toenails!" He rubbed his hip, scowling.

He made matters worse by backing away from the table and nearly tripping over a great, untidy pile of moth-eaten velvet window draping.

When a great swath of hanging cobwebs brushed across his face, clinging, he almost sifted himself out of the cramped and cluttered rooms.

There was only so much that a man – corporeal or otherwise – should be made to endure.

But the lure of the plaid bolts was greater.

A piece of *true* tartan, deftly applied, would protect him far better than any strip of plaid crafted in his usual finger-snapping way.

Sure of it, he threw open the door to yet another of the dark little rooms. He spotted the tartan at once. The colorful cloth was everywhere. Great teetering piles in such profusion, his heart near jumped from his chest. In one corner, the stacked bolts even reached the ceiling.

The room was empty otherwise, though a spill of ivy grew in through a crack in one of the grime-coated windows. The spreading green had claimed much of the far wall and some of the bolts stored

there.

Even so, there was more than enough cloth to suit his purpose.

Relief – and hope – pumping through him, he stood on the threshold and surveyed his choices. Ancient and covered with a thick layer of dust, the tartan patterns were difficult to distinguish.

Not that the plaid mattered.

What did was the tartan's strength.

He needed one whose weave hadn't been weakened by damp and centuries. Or worse, its proud threads assailed by moths and beetles. A single strip was all he required. But whatever he chose, the cloth had to hold securely, not giving at all once he'd fastened it into place.

His life – or *un*life – depended on it.

So he eyed the bolt stacks carefully.

It took him all of two beats to know what must be done.

Rubbing his hands together, he strode directly to the largest pile of tartan and thrust his arms deep into the center of the dusty bolts. He closed his fingers around the one that felt right, pulling the bolt swiftly from the pile.

He'd chosen well.

Not a mote of dust marred the ancient MacDonald tartan. A fine hunting weave of muted greens and blues, shot through with white, red, and black stripes. He recognized the sett as belonging to the MacDonalds of the Isles, long-time friends and allies.

He smiled, ran appreciative hands over the smooth, well-aged wool.

The MacDonald connection was surely a good portent.

Better yet, the bolt smelled fresh and clean.

Its position in the middle of the pile had allowed the tartan to defy the ravages of time, leaving its precious wool almost as pristine as the day some long forgotten soul had added the bolt to the stack.

Hardwick set the bolt aside and flexed his fingers, readying himself for what he must do. He felt a twinge of regret. It pained him that now, after centuries of lying untouched, he should be the one to mar such a noble tartan.

Fortunately, he was certain the MacDonalds wouldn't mind.

As with his good friend Bran of Barra, more than one of the braw MacDonalds stood in his debt.

So he closed his eyes and drew a deep, preparatory breath. Then he began unrolling the bolt with care, measuring just enough to suit his needs. Another deep breath and a few more finger flexes, and he was ready.

Gripping the tartan, he drew it taut and ripped off a suitable length.

Before guilt could besiege him, he dug his fingers into the cloth, holding it fast as he willed away the rest of his garb. Once naked, he wrapped the tartan around his hips. He wound the cloth band ever tighter, until he was certain even the slightest twitch of his best parts would prove impossible.

Satisfied, he knotted the tartan, well pleased with his handiwork.

He shoved a hand through his hair, excitement beginning to quicken his blood. Deliberately, he envisioned the sweet golden triangle topping Cilla's thighs. He imagined his hand cupping her heat and finding her slick, moist, and warm.

Soft, slippery, and eager for his caress, she'd surely also welcome his tongue. If not, he knew ways to persuade her to allow him the pleasure.

At the thought, heat flashed through him, his loins quickening as fierce need fired his blood.

But he didn't twitch.

The plaid wrapping worked well.

Tight, stifling, and a lust damper if ever there was one, the binding enabled him to switch his thoughts from plundering his lady's heat with his tongue to things as uninspiring as polishing the mail of his hauberk or watching several of Seagrave's kitchen laddies empty and then scrub the stronghold's cesspit.

His smile returned. His hope renewed.

Uncomfortable as it was, the binding would allow him many freedoms.

Truth be told, he'd never had a better idea.

He looked down, feeling his grin to his toes.

For good measure, he retied the binding's knot, making the fit just a bit tighter.

"By Thor's silver hammer!" A familiar voice boomed behind him. "I dinnae believe my eyes!"

"Bran!" Hardwick's good humor vanished.

He spun around to face his friend, summoning his plaid even as he wheeled about. He slapped at the familiar woolen pleats, brushing the folds in place. "Can you no' leave a man in peace?"

The Hebridean just stared at him, gog-eyed. "I know fine that some modern women run about wearing wee bits o' cloth that barely cover their bottoms, especially Ameri-*cains.* But I have ne'er yet seen a man donning such a style!"

"It isn't a *style,* you great buffoon." Hardwick glared at him. "It's to counter the Dark One's stipulation that I daren't-"

"Run hard." Blunt as always, Bran rocked back on his heels.

"As e'er, you're a man of few words." Hardwick folded his

arms. "Be glad you haven't such a need."

"I ne'er turned a druid from my door." Bran drew his brows together, eyeing Hardwick's plaid as if he could still see the tartan binding hidden beneath it. "Be that as it may, I'll own that – were I in your position – I might consider such measures. Even if I'll vow for all time that a Highlander's man piece wasnae made to be constricted!"

"Humph." Hardwick refused further comment.

He knew too well how much a Highlander appreciated a free and unrestricted swing.

"Why are you here?" Hardwick changed the subject. "I thought you'd gone back to Barra to gather your lads?"

"So I did!" Bran flashed a grin.

"Where are they?" Hardwick waited.

"Aye, well…" Bran looked down, shuffling his feet on the dusty floorboards. "My friends were in the midst of merrymaking when I returned to my hall." He glanced up again, gave Hardwick a sheepish smile. "It will take a while for their heads to clear enough for them to sift up here and join us. So-"

"You came ahead?" Hardwick was suspicious. "Since when do you – the greatest feast-giver in the Hebrides - walk away from a night of revelry?"

"Perhaps I'm growing old?" Looking anything but, the burly Islesman whacked Hardwick on the shoulder. "Seven hundred years wears on a soul."

Hardwick humphed again, not believing his friend's excuse.

Bran jutted his chin. "Could be I was worried about you."

"Worried about me?"

"So I was." Bran's tone took on an edge of belligerence. "The gods forgive you for doubting me. We are friends, you know. I aye stand by my allies."

This time it was Hardwick who looked down at his feet.

Or he would have if he hadn't caught himself fast enough. What he couldn't prevent was the way his chest tightened on his friend's admission.

As he'd already noted, since meeting Cilla, he'd grown way too soft-hearted.

So he summoned his most indifferent mien and pretended to adjust his plaid's gem-studded shoulder brooch. "I've no need of someone to look o'er me."

"Say you!" Bran grinned. "But no matter," he added as quickly. "Truth is, I also returned because the feasting in my hall bored me. I thought I'd do a bit of scouting on Mac's moorland. Maybe see if I saw any signs of his Viking ghosties before my lads

arrive."

Hardwick cocked a brow. "Did you see them?"

Bran stroked his beard. "If I had, you can be sure I'd still be busy with them." He made a few flourishes with his hand as if wielding a sword. "'Tis overlong since I've bloodied my fists, no' to mention swing my blade in earnest."

"So after you didn't meet up with Mac's Norsemen, you came here to tell me?"

"Sakes, no!" Bran swelled his chest. "I would have returned to Barra if that was all of it. You wouldn't have seen me again until I came back with my men."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I found something."

"Indeed?"

"Aye, and have a good look at it!" Bran held out a hand, wriggling his fingers to produce a shovel-like tool, its pointy head shiny and flat-bladed. "There's more where this came from. A whole cache of these, tucked in a wicker basket hidden in a fold of peat."

Hardwick frowned. "How many?"

Bran shrugged. "A good dozen, maybe more."

"In Mac's peat fields?"

"So I said, just." Bran nodded again, his face earnest. "The basket was deliberately hidden. I'd bet my beard on it."

Hardwick reached for the tool, examining it. Tiny words were inscribed on the steel of its triangular-shaped blade: MARSHALLTOWN COMPANY.

A term that made little sense, but for the cold prickles it brought to the back of his neck.

He curled his fingers around the tool's wooden handle and looked at Bran. "Have you e'er heard of such a workman's mark as this?"

Bran shook his head. "No' that I can recall, though the wee shovel does look familiar."

Hardwick nodded sagely.

He, too, had seen such a tool before. It was just a matter of time until he remembered.

When he did, he was sure, the *Marshalltown Company* and their tools would lead them a step closer to solving Mac's problems.

He felt it in his bones.

Just as he knew that whoever had hid the basket out on the moors would soon have hell to pay.

He'd see to it personally.

Chapter Thirteen

OFFICIAL KILT INSPECTOR

Emblazoned in bright red satin across the front of an Australian woman's royal blue jacket, the words jumped at Cilla each time she looked out at the expectant faces staring back at her from the small audience of her first Dunroamin-held broken china jewelry-making class.

A fan of Wee Hughie MacSporran, the woman – Elizabeth, according to the name stitched in large, equally scarlet letters on the back of her jacket – clearly wasn't interested in the little piles of colorful broken china lining the worktable set up in Dunroamin's vaulted basement.

The woman's gaze kept sliding elsewhere.

Namely to the stairs, where Hardwick stood on the bottom step, his arms folded as he leaned against the wall, watching the proceedings.

Light from a mock medieval torch streamed down from higher up in the stair tower, illuminating him in all his kilted magnificence. Soft and flickering, the fake torchlight drew attention to the sheen of his silky black hair and the width of his powerful shoulders. His cute knees and attractive, manly calves also caught the eye.

His hallmark sandalwood scent wafted on the air.

Above all, the light spilled across his kilt. Cilla tried not to notice.

Aussie Elizabeth looked nowhere else.

The woman was an annoyance Cilla didn't need, especially since she hadn't seen Hardwick for over a week. She'd spent seven sleepless nights wondering if he'd appear out of the darkness, towering above her bed and ready to ravish her. As the hours ticked by, she'd tossed and turned, wishing he would.

Knowing he'd spent the time prowling Uncle Mac's peat fields didn't help, either. Sure, she knew he was more than able to make short work of whoever was slinking about the moors, pretending to be Viking ghosts. But she also knew that there were other things spooking about Dunroamin.

And those things worried her.

He'd meant to reassure her when he'd sided with her about the devil face. His rallying had touched her deeply. But knowing that he didn't doubt the existence of such nightmare creatures was unsettling.

The devil face hadn't made a return sweep past her bedroom window, but she feared what would happen if Hardwick encountered

the fiend in the small hours on the moors.

She shuddered, trying to disguise her shiver by fiddling with her broken china tools. She shuffled them about on the worktable, doing her best to look busy.

As if she weren't concerned about devils and hell hags. Much better to appear cool and calm, as if just breathing Hardwick's medieval-y sandalwood scent wasn't making her all hot and bothered.

Which, of course, it was.

No man should smell so delicious.

As for how he looked…

She slid another glance his way, drawing a quick breath when he flashed her one of his dazzling smiles. Plain and simple, he was beautiful, but with a bold roguishness no modern day man could begin to claim.

Before she could away, his dark gaze flicked over her, reminding her that, for whatever reason, he found her equally appealing. It was a thought that made her pulse leap and, even now, unleashed a stir of flutters deep in her belly.

He was just too big and handsome.

He was definitely too kilted.

That he'd returned now was just her luck. This was a time when her composure was crucial and – damn it all – she'd chosen to give her workshop in Dunroamin's basement. Used regularly as a workstation, the vaulted undercroft was the most brightly lit area of the castle.

The high-powered spotlights trained on her worktable shone brightly on her, surely picking out the dark circles and puffiness beneath her eyes. Not to mention her little tummy roll that made it just a tad difficult to fasten the button at the top of her pants zipper.

She'd clearly eaten too much shortbread since arriving in Scotland.

Aussie Elizabeth appeared to have eaten nothing at all since leaving Sydney.

Cilla frowned.

If Ms. Official Kilt Inspector didn't soon stop ogling Hardwick – or cease wetting her wine-red lips – she'd find herself reimbursed for the cost of the evening's creative workshop.

Tempted to give her a refund immediately, Cilla blew out a breath. However hard it was to focus, she couldn't allow jealousy to ruin her presentation. Too much depended on its success; her goal being to help Dunroamin. So she stood straighter and forced a smile, somehow managing to appear at ease.

"I've always loved old things," she began, tightening her fingers around the mosaic nippers in her hand. "Treasures bursting with

character and history, but perhaps in need of a bit of whimsy and imagination on your part if, like me, you'd enjoy bringing them back to life."

Aussie Elizabeth yawned.

In the front row, Colonel Darling puffed on his pipe.

Hardwick's stare narrowed on her. She could feel it without looking. It was one of those slow, heavy-lidded stares that roamed her body, leaving behind a sizzling trail of heat that made it almost impossible to stand still.

She didn't dare glance at him now. Her knees would weaken and she'd forget everything she meant to say.

Flustered, she put down the nippers and picked up a box of especially lovely bits of porcelain. She angled it so that her audience could see the tiny pieces, hoping they'd keep their attention on the broken china and not notice how her cheeks were surely flaming.

Hardwick was trying to tell her something with his hot, dampen-her-panties stare, and she had a good idea what it was. She might not have ever experienced the wild, dizzying kind of raw, untamed sex that supposedly shook hills and made the world stop spinning, but she'd read enough romance novels and seen enough films to recognize Hardwick's message.

Something had happened.

Some difference that – dear heavens – meant he was going to make love to her.

She knew it instinctively and the thought electrified her. Unable to resist, she did slant a quick look at him and immediately wished she hadn't because as soon as their eyes met, he lowered his gaze to move slowly down and then up her thighs, finally settling *just there* where she'd swear she could feel the stirring touch of his expertly stroking fingers.

"Oh!" She disguised her gasp as a cough.

His eyes went even darker and one corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. He nodded ever so slightly, his gaze lingering just where it shouldn't.

I want you, Cilla lass.

The words hushed past her ear; his beautiful Scottish voice so deep and rich, and pitched so that no one else could hear. Noticing her discomfort, he arched a knowing brow. His barely there smile turned wicked.

Cilla recognized its portent and her tingly shivers sped over her skin, even curling her toes.

I go after what I want, sweet. And I dinnae give up until I have it.

His gaze was still locked on hers; the promise in his words making her heart jump.

Giving herself a shake, she looked down at the box of broken china in her hands. Each piece gleamed in the stark lighting. Most were irregularly shaped and showed antique patterns of floral design, the colors soft and muted.

She tightened her grip on the box, willing the blaze between her legs to recede by focusing on the porcelain. Bolder shards appeared of American origin. Vibrant reds, blues, and yellows marked them as having started their career as much-sought-after Fiestaware. Other, more fragile pieces proved edged with finest gold.

Violet Manyweathers leaned forward, her gaze on the box. "You're after helping us to make jewelry with these wee bits of china?"

"Pah!" Colonel Darling shot her a glance. "Of course she is! Why do you think we're sitting here? Though" – he waved the stem end of his pipe at the worktable – "unlike the rest of you, I'm only here to observe."

Violet dismissed him with a flip of her age-spotted hand.

"Speak for yourself," she quipped, eyeing a bloodred square of the dinnerware. "I might be for having a new pendant."

"And you can." Relieved to get her mind on something else, Cilla made a mental note to be sure Violet received the bit of red Fiestaware. "I'll help you with every step."

Violet sat back, looking pleased.

The colonel stuck his pipe in his mouth and returned to puffing.

Cilla cleared her throat. "Before we begin, you must understand one thing. These bits and pieces of cracked china are much more than that. They are broken beauties." She glanced around, her heart warming to a beloved theme. "Small shards of onetime cups and saucers, dessert plates, and anything else that was once well-loved and through no fault of its own, became damaged."

A matronly woman raised a hand in the back row. "How did you become interested in making such jewelry?"

"Long before I actually started." Cilla looked her way, remembering Aunt Birdie introducing her as the owner of Tongue's hair salon. "When I was about six or seven, I had a beautiful tea set. It was tiny, the pieces more doll-sized than for a child. Although my mother gave it to me, the set once belonged to my great-grandmother."

She trailed a fingertip across the china pieces. "The tea set was a lovely antique bisque shade decorated with pink and mauve roses and rosebuds. If I recall correctly, there were also little swirls of delicate green leaves. Very much like this…"

Looking down, she sorted through the box of china bits until

she found a similar piece. She held it up for the audience's examination.

A round of appreciative oohs and aahs rewarded her efforts.

"You must've been a good child." Flora Duthie's twittering voice rose from the first row. "I never allowed my girls to play with anything so fragile."

"Oh, my mother didn't either." Cilla smiled, remembering. "The tea set was for looking, not playing. It was kept behind the glass doors of a curio cabinet and" – she paused, trying to catch everyone's eye – "I found the pull of the miniature cups and saucers irresistible."

I find you irresistible.

Hardwick's words slid past her ear again. Deep, burred, and so honey-rich smooth she almost forgot to breathe. Shivery heat consumed her anew and she set down the box of china pieces. She didn't dare look at him. She was sure he knew what his sexy Highland voice did to her.

What he didn't know was how desperately she wanted to do the same to him.

But it'd been a while since she'd heard of anyone swooning over an American accent.

If ever.

She bit her lip, his tingle-stirring burr still spooling through her. Heaven forbid if he started his slow, heated, body-roaming stare magic again.

Half wishing he would, she took a steadying breath. "One day when my mother was out, I climbed onto a chair and tried to take the tea set from its shelf. I slipped, grabbing hold of the curio cabinet's glass shelf as I fell."

"Ach, dearie me!" A bespectacled woman in the second row gasped loudly.

Colonel Darling twisted around to glare at her. He also muttered something about interruptions, clearly excluding himself.

"Needless to say" – Cilla hoped her voice only sounded breathless to her - "I pulled down the entire curio cabinet. It landed on top of me, leaving scars I bear to this day. Worst of all, the mishap shattered my tea set."

A chorus of sympathy answered her.

She rested a hand on the worktable. "I was bereft. Trying everything, I begged my mother to let me fix it. She wouldn't allow me to glue back the broken pieces, claiming the tea set was ruined."

"But you saw it differently." The Tongue hair salon owner spoke up again. "You told her you wanted to make jewelry out of the smashed porcelain?"

Cilla smiled. "Not quite, but almost. I was just a child,

remember. The experience stayed with me, giving me my later passion for taking something that's been broken and turning it into something beautiful again."

On the words, a swirl of sandalwood slid around her, almost a caress. Tender this time, but equally potent. As if he knew she'd thought of him as she'd said the words.

She did mean to *un*break him, make him whole again.

In the audience, Aussie Elizabeth stirred in her chair. Her red lips went pouty and her gaze - still on Hardwick – turned come-get-me seductive.

Cilla frowned at her.

The Aussie shifted again, wittingly or unwittingly revealing that she'd neglected to wear panties beneath her short, hip-hugging skirt. Cilla nearly dropped the broken china link bracelet she'd just picked up, intending to pass it around as an example of her style.

Ms. Official Kilt Inspector's style was bare.

Cilla's jaw slipped. Her fingers tightened on the bracelet until its lobster claw clasp pinched her thumb.

Aussie Elizabeth stopped squirming. But she'd settled in such a way as to keep her charms exposed.

"Here's a seat if you're joining us." She patted the empty chair beside her, her gaze on a spot just past Cilla's shoulder.

Hardwick!

Cilla's breath caught. He'd moved to stand right behind her. His sexy sandalwood scent swept around her, bold and possessive. She swallowed hard, her heart racing as another, less welcome emotion jabbed green-tinged needles into her most vulnerable places.

From his new vantage point, Hardwick's view of the attractive Aussie's wiles was as good as her own. Perhaps even better, as, being a man, he wouldn't look away as she had.

It was a thought that sent bolts of white-hot fury whipping through her.

Setting down the pretty little sterling silver and broken china link bracelet, she sucked in a hot breath. She also hoped the word *jealous* wasn't stamped in bright, flaming letters across her forehead.

Something told her it was.

"There's a name for such women, but I'll no' speak it in your presence." Hardwick stepped closer, his deep voice low. "You are worth a thousand of her ilk, more even."

His praise sent the sweetest warmth spilling through her. No man had ever paid her such a fierce compliment. She felt entirely unworthy, but that didn't stop his words from affecting her. She was sure they'd also put fresh color on her face, but she didn't care.

All that mattered was Hardwick.

No man would dare call Hardwick a monk. But the brazen wench in the front row of Cilla's workshop participants left him that cold. He did fix her with a carefully neutral stare, her display not stirring him a whit.

Nor could anything under the stars persuade him to claim the empty seat she kept patting.

"I thank you, lady," he offered, inclining his head. "But like the colonel here" – he glanced at the man – "I am only here to observe. Miss Swanner and her porcelain pieces, mind."

The tart's legs snapped shut. "And I am here to make a Celtic brooch for the Highland Storyweaver." She sat up straighter, assuming a proprietary air. "Something Robert the Bruce-ish is what I have in mind. Wee Hughie is his grandson, eighteen generations removed."

"Indeed?" Hardwick arched a brow.

He considered telling her that in his seven hundred years of ghosting, he'd encountered enough supposed Robert the Bruce descendents to populate all of Scotland and then some.

Instead, he glanced at Cilla, not liking the dark circles beneath her eyes. The slight puffiness that betold she hadn't been sleeping well.

"You look tired, lass." He regretted his honesty the instant the words left his tongue.

He'd meant to whisper some choice bit of seductive wickedness in her ear. Perhaps suggest that after he'd finished tantalizing her with his fingers, he'd use his tongue to give her release. That's why he'd left the stairwell and approached her.

To let her know he meant to make love to her this night. Leastways as far as his present situation allowed.

Now he'd broken one of the first rules of wooing.

He'd commented on how ragged she looked.

"Lass" – he tried to make it better – "that's no' what I meant to say."

"I'm fine, thank you. Not tired at all." She snatched up her box of broken china and summoned the two red-haired youths he now knew to be Honoria's nephews. "If you'll excuse me, I'll get on with my workshop."

"You're also the loveliest sight to grace my eyes since" – he leaned close, ignoring her ire – "the last time I looked upon you."

Her mouth tightened and her gaze flicked to the trollop.

So that was it. She was jealous.

Hardwick almost whooped for joy.

"She cannae hold a candle to you." He folded his arms, feeling

smug. "Later, when we are alone, I shall prove it to you. As I've been trying to do the while, as I am sure you know."

To his delight, she blushed.

Looking sweetly flustered, she half turned away from him to pluck a small deep red square from her box of treasures. Then, clearly taking great pains to conceal how much he'd ruffled her, she handed the little piece of china to Flora Duthie who accepted it with glee.

When she returned to the worktable, her cheeks still glowed with anticipation and – he was certain, for he could see it – her pulse beat excitedly in the hollow of her throat.

She couldn't wait to be alone with him.

Her eagerness shone like a beacon.

Then she ruined it by flashing a bright smile on the two brawny lads, Robbie and Roddie.

Hardwick frowned.

She handed the taller of the two lads her box of broken china. "Robbie, if you'll pass this around so everyone can select a special piece and you, Roddie" – she gave the other youth a tray piled high with the tools she called *mosaic nippers* – "if you'll hand out these as well, we can get started."

As if on cue, Honoria and Behag Finney the cook stepped out of the shadows on the far side of the vaulted chamber. Coming forward, they held small tables he'd heard referred to as *folding work trays* clutched beneath their arms.

Nodding to them, his lady quickly returned her attention to the audience. She held up her own nipper and an uneven piece of porcelain.

"Most of the broken china pieces I use for my Vintage Chic collections are cut into squares, ovals, hearts, and rectangles." She set down the bit of porcelain and her nipper. "Even so, some of my most prized offerings have been made from irregular shapes. I'd suggest holding your piece in your hand while closing your eyes and then letting the china tell you in its own way how best to cut it."

Almost everyone except Colonel Darling nodded appreciatively.

Aussie Elizabeth rolled her eyes.

At the back of the room, Birdie MacGhee was clearly using her wifely influence to keep Mac from slapping his thigh and hooting loudly.

Hardwick, too, could have easily guffawed.

He'd lived too long and too hard to waste time listening to cracked and broken bits of porcelain.

He did look on as, contrary to his word, Colonel Darling fished not one but two pieces from the proffered box. Choosing first a small

bit of what Cilla termed *chintz*, a delicate-looking floral pattern in yellows, pinks, and greens; his second choice proved equally fine, this piece boasting hand-painted deep purple flowers and green leaves.

The colonel's puffed chest and the telling glances he bestowed on both Violet and Flora left little doubt as to whom he had in mind as recipients for his labors.

As if pretending not to notice – or, at the least, to have forgotten his avowals not to get actively involved in jewelry making – Cilla continued on. She moved about the rows of class attendees, the slight jigging of her breasts and the tempting sway of her hips making it difficult for Hardwick to think of much else.

Until she stopped beside wee Violet Manyweathers's folding work tray. The old woman's hands shook, making it difficult for her to cut her square of deep red Fiestaware into the oval shape she wished for a pendant.

Again and again, Cilla encouraged her, finally leaning down to cover the woman's trembling fingers with her own strong ones so that, together, they managed to clip and cut the square into Violet's oval.

Hardwick moved closer, watching silently and not even realizing he'd drawn so near to them until a loud yelp shattered the spell.

Eyeing him accusingly, Dunroamin's little mascot dachshund, Leo, peered up at him from where he'd been curled at Violet's feet.

"Sorry, laddie." Hardwick reached down to pat the dog's head.

But much as he regretted stepping on Leo's tail, his mind was elsewhere.

Instead of Dunroamin's well-lit vaulted undercroft, he saw Seagrave's great hall. Rather than Cilla and Violet Manyweathers, his long-ago intended and his mother loomed before him. Recalled from the hazy mists of time, the two souls from his past filled his vision, one much-loved and cherished, the other inspiring only distaste.

As if it were only yesterday, he looked on as the beautiful Lady Dolina appeared behind his mother's chair and then leaned down to snatch the spoon from his mother's bent and trembling fingers.

"She should be locked in a tower! Kept away from the hall, where a nurse can hand feed and coddle her." Lady Dolina slapped the spoon onto the high table, well out of his aging mother's reach. "It offends my eyes to watch her food dribble down her chin."

"And you offend me." Hardwick took the beauty by the elbow, pulling her from the dais and, ultimately, out of his hall.

It was the last he'd seen of her, not that he'd minded.

What he did mind was her intrusion now.

She'd robbed him of the pleasure of watching Cilla bend down

to help Violet Manyweathers cut her square of red dinnerware. Prepared as he was – he'd pulled his tartan binding especially tight – he'd been enjoying how her well-rounded buttocks bobbed with her every move.

He didn't need to examine the tightness in his chest.

Born of an entirely different emotion; one Bran would surely call love, neither his lustful urgings nor the swellings of his heart mattered at the moment.

His mother and Lady Dolina were gone.

And they'd taken Cilla and Violet with them.

Hardwick frowned, blinking.

He knuckled his eyes, but nothing changed. The vaulted undercroft was empty. Only the vacated seats and his lady's worktable remained.

Furious that he'd spent much more time than he'd thought peering into his own past, he took a piece of brilliant blue Fiestaware from the box of broken china. He turned the shard over in his hand, his heart thumping harder the longer he peered at it.

It was the same blue as Cilla's eyes.

"Where were you?"

He whirled around at her voice. The shard of blue flew from his fingers. "I … hell and botheration, I-" He reached down, swiping the little piece of dinnerware off the undercroft's stone-flagged floor.

"Well?" She stepped out of the shadows, the neat stacks of folding work trays lined against the wall behind her indicating what she'd been doing.

"I was thinking." He set the shard on the table. "Thinking of you, and so deeply that I didn't realize you'd ended your-"

"I didn't mean now." Her gaze flickered to the chair where the trollop had sat. "I meant all this week?"

"I was patrolling your uncle's peat fields. I thought you knew." It was the best answer he could give her, unwilling as he was to reveal that he'd spent the time drilling himself on the moors.

Using every passing moment to dwell on his desire for her in order to test the strength of his tartan binding, only returning once he'd assured himself he could pleasure her without suffering his own arousal.

He looked at her now, not missing the bright color staining her cheeks. Nor did he fail to note that she was avoiding his eyes. When she once more flashed a glance at the other woman's seat, he knew why.

"By Odin!" Disbelief swept him. "Dinnae tell me you think I was with thon lassie?"

Her eyes flashed. "She was really interested in you."

"She could have thrown off her clothes and pranced about naked for all I care." Picking up the blue shard again, he wrapped his fingers around it, squeezing hard. "I would still no' have seen her. No' in the way you mean."

Cilla bit her lip, wanting to believe him. But just that moment her waistband was biting viciously into her recently acquired belly roll.

She flipped back her hair, met his gaze full on. "She has a flat stomach."

The words sounded petty even to her.

Unable to retract them, she started to frown when – to her amazement – Hardwick jammed his fists on his hips and, throwing back his head, began to laugh.

His dark eyes alight, he grinned. "I can see you've ne'er known a Highlander if you think we lust after stick women!"

Cilla tried to appear unaffected. "I'm sure I don't know what a Highlander lusts after."

"Then, my sweet" – he stepped closer, his thumb rubbing slow circles over the piece of blue Fiestaware in his hand – "perhaps it is time you learned."

She glanced aside, painfully aware of the bright overhead lights shining down on them. They'd highlight the puffiness beneath her eyes and her mussed hair. Having attempted to look calm, cool, and collected, she'd adopted Aunt Birdie's signature french twist.

Only on her, it hadn't worked.

Her hair wasn't long enough, and the pins had slipped. The elegant do was now nearly undone.

"My ex was of Highland stock." It was a poor excuse, but bought her time. "At least he claimed-"

"Sweeting, if he'd been a true Highlander, you would have known it." His voice deepened, his burr flowing through her like sun-warmed honey. "As a good friend of mine is wont to say, 'There are men and there are Highlanders. Woe be to anyone fool enough not to know the difference.'"

"I can tell the difference." She looked back at him, her heart clutching. "It's a big one."

"Aye, so I've been told." He flashed a wolfish smile.

Cilla's eyes widened.

He laughed.

Heat consumed her, his nearness and the look on his face exciting her even more than the ghostly magic of his hot stares and roving fingers. Her pulse quickened and her mouth went dry. She was falling under his spell, losing herself more with each passing

moment. Her entire body thrummed with wanting him.

Her heart…

"Tell me again how you can seem so real," she blurted, nerves making her grasp for a safer subject.

"Because I will it so and" – he paused, his voice turning earnest – "because I've had seven hundred years' practice."

Unable to argue, Cilla glanced to wear Leo slept curled beneath the worktable. "And him?" She waited until he, too, looked down at the little dog. "Why isn't he afraid of you? I've always heard dogs ran from ghosts?"

He stepped closer, touched his hand to her cheek. "Do you always believe what you hear, Cilla-lass?"

"I-"

"Dogs are no different than people." His smile returned, his eyes warming. "In spirit or in life, they are the same souls. Dinnae tell me you've ne'er noticed that dogs can tell when someone likes them or no'."

He cast another glance at Leo. "They also ken a good soul from a bad one. That knowledge doesnae change just because the soul they see might be others."

"Others as in a ghost?"

He nodded.

Under the table, Leo stretched and started snoring.

Hardwick smoothed a strand of hair off her face, the look in his eyes warming her to the roots of her own soul. Never had a man touched her so deeply both inside and out. She couldn't imagine what would happen when he really touched her, something she knew was going to happen very soon.

She moistened her lips. "Are you trying to tell me you're a good man?"

"Nae." He shook his head slowly. "I mean to show you how good you are."

She blinked. "Me?"

He leaned in to nuzzle her neck, letting his lips brush across her skin. "You and no other," he declared, nipping her ear.

"You sound like you mean that." Cilla's heart began a slow, hard thumping.

"Because I do." He lifted the shard of blue Fiestaware he still held and appeared to examine it. "Did you know, for starters, that your eyes are the same brilliant blue as this? Or" – he put down the bit of dinnerware and picked up a cream china piece with a delicate gold-edge – "that your hair glistens with the same golden sheen as the rim of this porcelain?"

He looked at her for a long moment, his gaze burning her

soul. "A man could lose himself in such eyes as yours." He put down the fragile bit of gold-rimmed china and reached for her hair, twining a lock through his fingers. "In my day, kings would have gone to their knees for a maid with such silken tresses of gold. This day, this e'en, I am telling you that I have dreamt of touching your hair."

He let the strands spill across his hand. "I have dreamt of much, lass."

She bit her lip, unable to speak.

His words were melting her.

As for his eyes, it almost hurt to look into them, so intense was his stare. No man had ever looked at her with such naked hunger.

"You have a silvered tongue." She stumbled over her own, the wild hammering of her heart making it impossible to think. "No one ever said-"

"More's the pity." He turned back to the table, taking a sliver cut from Violet's red dinnerware. "And more is my pleasure in showing you. Behold the rich color of your lips," he added, holding the tiny shard to the light before returning it to the table. "Sweet lips that beg kissing."

The world tilted. "A Highlander's kiss?"

His smile went devilish. *"My kiss."*

Before she could blink, he pulled her into his arms and slanted his mouth over hers in a hot, demanding kiss. Her blood sizzled and the room spun. A whirlwind of desire whipped through her and she clung to him, pressing close as he deepened the kiss and they lost themselves in a swirl of lips, tongue, and soft, heated breath.

"O-o-oh," she gasped, pulling in air even as he claimed another bold, soul-slaking kiss.

He wrapped his arms around her, dragging her even closer. He let his hands glide low until he splayed his fingers across her hips, holding her tight against him as he kissed her again and again.

"Now, my love," – he pulled back to look at her – "now, you've almost been kissed by a Highlander."

She blinked. *"Almost?"*

"Aye, just." He slid a hand into her hair, plucking out the remaining pins and tossing them onto the floor. "There's another kind of kiss we specialize in, see you."

Cilla almost choked. "What do you mean?"

"We are earthy men." He smiled. "Surely you can guess?"

He lowered his gaze, and she knew indeed.

"Oh, no…" Embarrassment scalded her cheeks. "You can't mean-"

"Och, but I do." He reached for her blouse, already unbuttoning. "I aye keep my word, Cilla-lass. I'm about to show you

how good you are. Some might say how delectable."

She gulped.

He folded his arms, looking supremely satisfied. "'Tis time you were pleasured by a man who lives to please you."

Chapter Fourteen

"Wait."

Cilla grabbed Hardwick's wrists just as he neared the last few buttons of her top. Already her breasts felt tight and heavy, needing his touch. Sensual awareness rippled all through her and she felt a fierce urge for more. Her heart raced madly, yet she bit her lip, holding back. She wanted this, everything, but still...

She glanced at the overhead spotlights, blinking in their harshness. "The light is too much." *It will reveal my flaws.*

You might not want me.

"Och, nae, sweeting." He shook his head, smiling. "There cannae be enough light. I would see you clearly." His gaze dipped to her half-opened blouse, his eyes glittering darkly. "All of you that I can feast my eyes on."

"But-"

He pressed two fingers against her lips, silencing her. "But is a word I dinnae acknowledge."

"It has its purpose." She aimed another glance at the spotlights.

They really were bright.

She frowned. "The lights bother me."

His smile faded. "Why do I think you mean that?"

"Because I do." She glanced aside. "You heard my talk tonight; the part about the glass curio cabinet that fell on me when I was little."

He was on her in a wink, seizing her chin and turning her to look at him. "Dinnae tell me you're fashing yourself o'er childhood scars?"

"It isn't that..." She hedged.

The scars were tiny and barely visible. A magnifying glass would be needed to find them. What she'd meant was how she'd reached for something she'd wanted so badly only to have it come tumbling down on top of her.

Now she wanted Hardwick that desperately.

She was fiercely attracted to him, but her feelings went so much deeper. Sure, her breath hitched every time he looked at her. But his concern for her aunt and uncle, for Dunroamin, swelled her heart. His medieval drive to protect them, spoke to something inside her, even making her throat thicken at times. He was more than good looking, more than a hot Scottish accent. He could be everything to her; perhaps he already was. She did know that to lose him would fill

her with a vast emptiness.

So she didn't want to risk anything that might send him running from her.

He was masculine perfection, every powerfully honed inch of him. The dark silk of his hair, and his smoldering gaze, his big, strong hands, and his sandalwood scent...

She was made of flaws, and not just physically.

Everything she touched went wrong.

Her past relationships, her business, her most heartfelt hopes and dreams – could this with him, go right?

Weren't they doomed from the start, meeting centuries apart? However real and solid he was able to manifest. At the end of the day, he was what he was.

She glanced aside, hoped he wouldn't see her blink back the moisture stinging her eyes. She wasn't her Aunt Birdie. She didn't know if she had the nerve, the daring, to jump off a cliff to see if she'd learn to fly.

"You don't understand," she tried to explain. "I'm not-"

"You are all that I want. The only thing I desire in this world, or any other." Stepping closer, he brushed his lips across her brow. "I'll kiss every one of the wee scars until you forget them."

"The scars don't bother me."

He arched a brow. "What then?"

"It's, well…" *I'm sure I've fallen in love with you.*

"'Tis nerves, I can see. But you've no cause for such worries." He cupped her chin, tilting her face upward. "Do you no' ken that I've wanted you from the moment I first saw you? That I desired you even then?"

She nodded, remembering the heat in his eyes.

Hadn't she felt it, too?

"You're forgetting one thing," he said, as if he sensed her capitulation. "I've already seen you naked." His voice deepened, the rich, silky-smooth tones spilling into her, making her feel wanted, feminine and desirable. "Unless I've lost my skill, you've already felt my hands on you."

She blushed. "I did notice something, during my presentation," she admitted, stunned she'd told him.

"Seven hundred years of waiting for you, lass." He lowered his gaze so that, again, she felt what could only be described as his hand between her legs. It was the sensation of his finger gliding along her center, teasing and tantalizing her.

Liquid fire across her nerves, taking her breath. Her heart beat faster, her pulse leaping at the intimacy.

"Mercy," she gasped, stunned by the bliss spilling through her.

"Wait till it *is* my finger, Cilla-lass." He circled his thumbs over the swell of her breasts as he spoke, rubbing her through the lace of her bra. He looked at her then, his gaze intense. "When it's my tongue, I may no' stop. No' e'er, if suchlike were possible. I am that ravenous for you.

"I will devour you whole." He caught her hand and lifted it to his lips, kissing her fingertips. "I've waited too long and must have you now, and in all the ways that have been maddening me. If I cannae, I'll go crazed."

"No, I will." *I already am*. Cilla's sex clenched, his words electrifying her. She wanted his hands on her, stroking and rubbing with her, driving her wild. She *burned* for him to touch his tongue to her, to kiss and lick her.

"Would you like a sample tongue swirl?" He leaned close, his voice low and gruff. "That, too, is within my powers, though I'd rather really tongue you."

"Yes!" she blurted. "I mean no. Not yet. It's the lights. They-"

He drew back, looking at her. "The lights are of no import."

"But-"

"No buts. Though" – he turned a gaze of his own on the blaring spotlights – "I'll own your modern lights are lacking in grace. Were this Seagrave, and in my day, I'd ravish you by candlelight. As is…"

He grinned and snapped his fingers.

At once, the awful overhead lighting vanished and a warm golden glow surrounded them. Soft and flickering, it shimmered everywhere, broken in places by deep shadow that felt equally inviting.

Cilla blinked. "Oh, my!"

"You are pleased?"

"I have no words." She looked around, her jaw slipping when she saw that Uncle Mac's mock torchlights in the stairwell now burned for real. As did the iron-bracketed wall sconces lighting the vaulted undercroft.

Medieval trappings that – she knew - hadn't been there a moment before.

Yet her worktable and broken china tools remained. And, she noted with relief, little Leo still slept where he'd curled up on the undercroft floor. The only difference was that a sweet-smelling layer of herbed rushes now covered the stone flagging, and Leo – bless Hardwick for his thoughtfulness – rested on a soft and warm-looking bed of plaid.

Cilla swung back to Hardwick. "How did you do that?"

He shrugged, trying without much success to look modest. "I told you I've had centuries of practice. Truth is, I could have conjured a much more splendiferous setting, but I am selfish this night."

"Selfish?"

"Aye, sure as rain, I am." A corner of his mouth hitched up. "I'm saving my strength to please you."

"Oh." Her heart skittered.

Her knees started going soft again and she drew a great, shuddery breath. It was all she could do not to fling her arms around him and beg him to kiss her. Her entire body quivered with excitement, delicious tingles streaking from head to toe.

"So you see, my sweet," his voice softened on the endearment. "I dinnae want to expend more of my powers than need be. No' till I've finished with you."

"That's not selfish." She touched his chest, feeling his strength through the rough wool of his plaid.

"Nae?" He leaned close, his breath warm on her cheek. "Then you're no' considering how much pleasure I'll have. Can you no' imagine how I've ached to kiss every sweet golden inch of you? To see you spread naked before me and then use my tongue to lick, lave, and taste you until you cry out your release?

"I want all that and more." He swirled the tip of his tongue across her ear. "So dinnae tell me nae." He nipped the side of her neck. "'Tis too late."

Stepping back, he reached for her blouse again. But before he set his fingers to the remaining buttons, he slid a meaningful glance towards the far wall where she'd stacked the folding work trays.

The wall was empty now.

Until he narrowed his eyes and a tall standing candelabrum appeared. Resplendent, a good dozen fine wax tapers burned brightly in its curved and swirling arms. A further flip of one finger and a beautiful low-slung bed joined the candle stand.

Richly carved of gleaming, high-polished oak, the chaise-cum-bed beckoned with a lush covering of royal blue velvet.

Cilla's heart slammed against her ribs. She knew what he intended to do to her on that bed. He'd just told her, and she burned for every wild and earthy delight he'd promised.

She took a deep breath, unable to tear her gaze off the bed.

A whole battalion of butterflies took flight in her belly.

"You made that for us." She could hardly believe it.

"And you were made for me." His fingers were warm against her breasts, even slipping inside her bra to brush across her nipples. "I am glad the bed pleases you."

She nodded, too overcome to speak.

She was also hovering near a climax. And she was still fully clothed! From nowhere, she remembered the saying about Highlanders being different from other men. Now she knew how true that was.

But adage wasn't complete.

Highlanders weren't just different, they were better.

"The bed is beautiful," she said, swaying slightly, excitement weakening her knees.

"As are you," he vowed, undoing the last of her buttons. "The blue is for your lovely sapphire eyes," he said, glancing at the bed. "The rest is for your pleasure."

"And yours?" Her breath caught as he slid her top down her shoulders and made quick work of her bra, tossing both aside before she even realized he'd removed them. "What about your pleasure?"

"You are my pleasure." His eyes darkened as he looked at her, his heated stare making her breasts ache with need. "It is enough."

He reached for her, his hands palming and kneading the fullness of her breasts, his thumbs circling her hard-puckered nipples. Exquisite pleasure spiraled through her, a thousand times greater than the rousing *stare-caresses* he'd already given her.

His touch, for real, undid her.

"Oh, Hardwick." She arched her back, causing her breasts to lift, offering herself to him. "I want to touch you, too…"

"You enchant me." He leaned down, dragged his tongue across the top swells of her breasts. "I need naught else."

But when he swept her up against his rock-hard chest and strode for the low blue-cushioned bed, she knew that she needed more.

She wanted to satisfy him, too.

Unfortunately – or not, depending – he was already lowering her onto the chaise-bed, his fingers working the clasp of her belt.

The feel of him undoing and then peeling off her pants – her panties! – robbed her of all thought.

Except one.

She wanted, *ached*, to be naked with him.

Her mind blanked to all but the touch of his warm strong fingers as he pulled off her clothes, tossing each piece onto the rush-strewn floor. The flickering torchlight slid over her, casting her body in soft light and shadow. And even she had to admit the effect was flattering, like nothing of this world's harsh and glaring light.

Even her slight belly roll looked more feminine than fat.

But before she could think too much about it, he crushed her to him, kissing her long and deep. It was a fierce kiss, all rough, open-mouthed desperation. She returned his passion with equal hunger,

digging her fingers into his plaid, clutching his broad, powerful shoulders. Any moment, she half expected him to disappear, for some great fist to slam down and smash them, punishing them for daring to claim what they both wanted so badly. But he only kept kissing her, each wild, sweep of his tongue against hers proving what he'd said: he really was ravenous for her.

Then he tore his mouth from hers, his dark gaze blazing as he helped her sink onto the edge of the bed. "You are beautiful, Cilla-lass. Precious and golden," he claimed, now looking right at the curls between her legs. "Dinnae deny me this pleasure."

"I won't." *I couldn't if I wanted to – which I don't!* She could hardly breathe for arousal, and she barely heard him for the thunder of her pulse in her ears.

"You are the greatest gift and there is naught I've e'er wanted more." He knelt before her and eased her thighs apart, opening her for his caress.

Those special Highland kisses she wanted so badly.

He was about to give them to her and the thought made her mouth go dry and nearly stopped her heart. Oral sex was something she only knew about from romance novels. She didn't have firsthand experience, however much the idea had always excited her. None of her boyfriends had ever shown interest.

Now…

It was her turn.

"Precious lass, I would drink of you if I could, drench myself with the taste of you," he spoke against her belly, his breath soft and warm. A light, teasing breeze across her intimate curls, a barely-there sensation but so earth-shaking in its intensity, she would have sworn trapped lightning sizzled between her legs.

"O-o-oh!" Her eyes flew wide.

Hardwick chuckled, a deep, low rumble, pure male satisfaction.

He looked up at her. "I've no' yet started."

"But-"

"No buts, I've told you." He returned his attention to her belly, nuzzling, nipping, and licking her skin. "Relax, and let me love you."

His hands slid up and down her hips, then moved lower to stroke along her inner thighs, urging them wider. "Open to me. I want to see and kiss all of you."

"Yes, please. I want…" She couldn't say more, bit down on her lower lip. The sensations were intense, maddeningly delicious. She was already slick and wet, his words pushing her to the edge. Almost there, she did as he'd asked and let her knees fall wide, giving

him the access he craved.

The hot-tingling intimacy that had her fisting her hands against his beautiful blue bed. Need raced all through her as he gripped her knees, keeping her thighs splayed.

She wanted him to have everything –and never had she wanted a man more.

She didn't just love him.

He'd become the air she breathed.

Hardwick looked down at her. For one crazy-mad moment, he almost ripped off his tartan binding so he could sink deep inside her, taking her as he knew he daren't. He burned to feel her tight, silken heat, if only for one forbidden moment. To revel in the sweetness of her legs wrapped around him as he slid in and out of her.

Instead he drew a great breath and prayed the binding would hold.

Then he lowered his head and began licking the satiny insides of her thighs. She gasped, her lush body so languid and eager beneath him, her ardor driving him wild. His tongue flickered over her sensitive skin, the torture – and bliss - almost too intense to bear.

Her heat beckoned him, but he held back, wanting to give her as much pleasure as he could.

She writhed and trembled in response. "It is so good. I've never felt anything sweeter." She dug her fingers into his shoulders, holding tight. "Don't stop, please!"

He glanced up at her, sure she'd never looked more desirable than now, with her hair mussed, and her eyes glazed by passion. "Och, I shan't."

Instead, he thrust his hands beneath her buttocks, squeezing and kneading them as he slid open-mouthed kisses along her smooth, silken skin. His heart thundered and his entire body tightened, stirred by at her receptiveness.

And he hadn't yet even neared the hot, female delicacy at the apex of her thighs.

"Hardwick…" She watched him, wonder on her face.

"Shhh, lass," he spoke low, inhaled the womanly scent of her. "Let me show you how much I crave you."

He locked his gaze on hers, his grip on her bottom tightening as he braced himself to lick his way closer. The scent of her hot, musky arousal hung between them, tingeing the air and filling his lungs, absolutely intoxicating him.

Needing her so badly, he tore his gaze from hers and looked down, treating himself to the beauty of her glistening golden curls. The soft and slippery temptation of her sleek, wet need and the way

she quivered beneath his stare.

He swallowed hard, his own lust straining against the tightly wound tartan.

He bit back a curse, fierce desperation welling inside him.

Knowing he must, he blotted his mind. With all his strength, willing himself not to see the lush silken heat only a breath away from his hungry eyes, his eager tongue. Instead, he imagined the pile of bricks and stones generations after him had used to deface his beloved home.

Closing his eyes to give the image more power, he lowered his head and licked, using pure male honing instinct to run the tip of his tongue first up, then down the damp and fragrant center of her.

"Ah-h-h!" Her legs stiffened, sweet tremors rippling the length of her. *"Hardwick!"*

The need in her voice nearly broke him.

His eyes snapped open. The sight of her splayed wide – and so close before him – took his breath, leaving only a blazing fire that scalded his lungs and left him wondering why he didn't burn to a crisp. He couldn't remember ever feeling such a primal bond to any woman, such consuming desire.

Then she rocked her hips and her soft wetness brushed his chin, her damp, musk-scented flesh stealing his reason.

"By all the gods!" He jerked his head back, his restraint almost shattered.

Desire exploding, he yanked his hands from beneath her and gripped her hips as he opened his mouth over her. He drew hard, drinking in the whole of her until only his need to breathe made him tear himself away.

"You will be the end of me." She was staring at him, glassy-eyed and panting. Her soft well-curved body glowed in the candlelight, his sweet, golden goddess, her knees falling wider as she opened herself more fully.

"You are everything." Again and again, he licked her, only stopping to give her most sensitive spot the quick little circling swirls he knew she needed. Or to grant himself the pleasure of dipping his tongue inside her, probing her deepest heat and letting himself revel in the hot, stirring wetness of her.

She trembled from head to toe, shivering with pleasure.

He shook with the taste of her. Her clean, tangy scent flooded his senses, making him burn. He daren't risk the like again. As it was, his every muscle strained with the effort of squelching his arousal. The relentless pull at his loins, the lengthening that was becoming impossible to deny.

"Please." She twined her fingers in his hair, clutching him to

her.

Somewhere something ripped – he heard the tearing cloth – but he no longer cared. The taste and scent of her on his tongue made him wild. So he growled, something he couldn't recall ever having done, then set to pleasing her one kiss, lick, and tongue-swirl at time.

He released his fierce grip on her hips to run his hands over her breasts, plumping and squeezing, using his fingers to roll and flick her swollen nipples. He, too, felt swollen. But he also felt the strength of the plaid wrapping holding him back, some small part of him realizing that it hadn't been the tartan, but the blue bed covering that had torn.

His binding, painful as it was, held firm.

His lady was unraveling.

She needed release.

So he slid his hands beneath her again, cupping her bottom and lifting her hips. "Spread your legs wider, lass." He caught her gaze, wanting her to see him pleasure her. "As wide as you can and keep them that way, look on as I complete you."

"Oh God…." She bit her lip, but nodded.

"See me touch my tongue to your most sensitive place." And he did, not taking his eyes off hers as he lowered his head and licked the tiny, pulsing bud he knew would send her sliding into ecstasy.

Again and again he circled his tongue across her special place, every few swirls easing back to lick down the length of her. He let his tongue glide and probe, then return again to flick at her little lust-spending nub.

And with each honeyed whirl, he envisioned another stranger's brick or stone marring the face of his home.

One brick, one heated tongue swirl, as he imagined the defilers taking the brick from the pile. A new stone, another slow, lascivious lick down his lady's center, tasting and relishing.

Sweat began dotting his forehead, so great was the strain, but he couldn't stop if his life – or *un*life – depended on it.

Truth was, he'd devour her till the end of time if he only could.

But before he'd gone through even half his imagined piles of bricks and stones, she arched her back and tossed her head, crying out her release.

"Aggggghhhh…" She jerked and then fell back against the little chaise bed, gasping. "Hardwick…"

Seagrave….

A second voice also called for him. High-pitched, female, and cackle-ish, it came from the deep shadows near the undercroft's stairwell.

Beneath the table, Leo snarled.

Hardwick's blood chilled.

Not wanting to, but unable to do otherwise, he looked down at the little dog. Not surprisingly, the dachshund's hackles were raised and his brown gaze was fixed in the exact direction Hardwick had suspected it would be.

Leo knew.

And, the ancients help him, so did he.

His gut clenching, he swiveled his head toward the stairs. But they were no longer there. A woman was – a hell hag – and she wasn't alone.

She stood front and center in a great gaping hole where the softly-lit stairwell should have risen to Dunroamin's kitchens. Uncountable look-alike crones crowded behind her, all of them jostling to peer and jeer at him.

"Seagrave…" The first hag lifted gnarled hands to rip open her cowled black robes, the withered flesh beneath curdling his innards. "We're waiting for you…"

Another stepped forward. Baring her thin pendulous breasts, she lifted them in offering. "It's been so long since we've had a man," she trilled, her lips curling in a horrid, gap-toothed smile.

Then the vision was gone.

The warning.

Leo's growls subsided, turning slowly back into snores.

Cilla's hand was inching beneath his kilt, her questing fingers curling round his thighs and gliding provocatively upward.

"Nae!" He jerked back, leaping off the little blue bed. "Dinnae touch me."

"What's wrong?" She bolted up, eyes wide.

The worry on her face slammed into him. "Just stay there. Dinnae come near me. No' now."

He'd ne'er dreamed the hags would come so close. That they'd manifested so fully in the same room as Cilla – even if she hadn't seen them – frightened him more than anything ever had, in both his earth life and the long centuries since.

"But why?" Confusion and hurt flashed across her face and, seeing it, Hardwick flinched. He dropped back down onto the bed and drew her into his arms, cradling her as best he could without letting himself truly feel her pressed against him.

A next to impossible feat but not near as difficult as what he must do.

"It has naught to do with you, sweetness." He cupped her chin, risking a soft kiss.

He hoped she'd believe him.

"What we just shared was wondrous beyond telling." He sat

back, smoothed a hand down over her hair. “Were the world different or were my life, if we can call it such, others than it is, I would spend every hour loving you.”

She frowned. “But?”

“But” – this time he let the word go – “we should ne’er have gone so far. I should’ve known better. There are dangers greater than I thought and I cannae allow them to steal into Dunroamin more than they already have.”

“If you think I’m afraid, you’re wrong.” She slung a leg over his lap, scrambling onto his kilted thighs.

She wriggled on top of him, all hot, slippery woman. For one heart-stopping moment, he’d have sworn she lowered herself onto him. Slick burning heat, tight and wet throbbed around him, the glory of it almost blinding. But then he felt her sleekness glide across his naked thighs and he knew he’d been mistaken, his desire for her letting him imagine.

Much as he’d used his powers to let her feel his hand pleasuring her earlier.

“It doesnae matter how brave you are,” he said, the words breaking his heart. Frustration clawed him and he gritted his teeth, thinking again of bricks and stone. “It was wrong of me to do this. I should ne’er have touched you.”

“No! It was beautiful, all of it.” She shook her head, looking frantic. “I refuse to let you think otherwise. Not now, not tomorrow, not ever.”

“Ach, lass.” He caught her arms when she tried to sling them around his neck. “You know of the curse. If you believe in me” – he lifted her off his lap – “and after what we just enjoyed, we both know that you do.”

He stood, needing distance. “Then you must also believe in the spell I’m under. In my day, druid-wizards were powerful men. So skilled, their magick so great, that their reach lives on, even into your time. Such a curse cannae be undone.

“Only by the Dark One,” he admitted, that truth sluicing his veins with ice. “He could twist the heads off an army of druids with a flick of his hand.

“What he’d do to me…” He didn’t finish, not wanting to alarm her more than already had.

“We can fight them together.” She pushed to her feet, coming after him. “I can-”

“I am no’ a piece of your broken china, sweetness.” He shoved a hand through his hair, almost wishing that he was. “You cannae put me together again with a bit of glue and molten silver.”

Her chin came up, her eyes glistening.

"If I'd like to try?"

"There is nothing you can do." He looked at her, seeing so much love and despair on her face that it ripped his soul. So he began moving around the undercroft, scowling at the conjured bits of his world until they vanished one by one.

He left the candelabrum and the little blue bed till last.

Then they, too, were gone.

As before, Dunroamin's modern spotlights blazed down onto her worktable. And little Leo once again slept curled on the naked stone flags of the floor.

Hardwick sighed, feeling all the weight of his centuries bearing down on him.

"I must go, lass."

"Go?" Her eyes rounded.

The way she said the word gutted him.

She pressed her hands to her face, paling. "You can't mean you're leaving?"

"Aye, I am." He took a great breath, knowing one of them needed to remain calm. "There is one chance that might help us. It's a slim one, but I have to risk it."

"By leaving?"

"Nae." He shook his head slowly. "By pleading the Dark One's mercy."

She took a step backward, almost staggering. "You're going there? To hell?"

Hardwick nodded. "To the Dark One's corner of it, aye."

He'd go there, demand entry, and state his piece. If he was met with refusal, he'd do more.

No matter the consequences.

"So you are not tired of women?"

The Dark One's voice tore through the whirling gray mist of the Great Beyond. Though yet within the walls of his massive stone temple, he spoke with authority and power, his every word deep as rumbling thunder and edged with the crackling sizzle of lightning bolts.

Hardwick strode into the swirling gray, breeching the first rule of the Dark One's inner sanctum by arriving at his own behest. As if personally affronted, the ever-present fog shimmied and thickened around him. Undaunted, he pressed on, his only concession the hand he kept on the hilt of his sword.

He could feel the Dark One's displeasure at his boldness.

His hand stayed where it was.

He did stop a respectable distance from the ring of thick-

growing guardian trees surrounding the temple. Blessedly, there weren't any naked beauties tied to them, bound by their hair and ropes of shimmering, unbreakable mist.

"I wait, Seagrave." The Dark One's voice cracked like a whip. "Are you weary of women or not?"

"I am a Highlander. We ne'er tire of women." Hardwick spoke at last, even though the trees and the mist kept much of the temple from view. "'Twas the curse alone that plagued me."

Silence followed.

He imagined the Dark One raising an annoyed black brow.

"Have you not found the peace you sought in your quiet Dunroamin, sequestered haven in Scotland's far north?" The disembodied voice rose, booming loud enough to echo to infinity. "I see you do not carry your shield. Is it not enough to be rid of such a burden as you've suffered these centuries?"

"My shield is here if I need it." Hardwick flicked his fingers and the shield appeared in his hand. "As for my burden" - he stood tall, willing to give thanks where it was due – "I am grateful it is done and by with."

"So you should be."

For a beat, Hardwick thought he caught a soft chuckle from inside the temple.

But if he had, the Dark One's next words ruined the image. "Then what of the peace, Seagrave? Did you find your heart's desire at Dunroamin?"

Hardwick's ears sharpened. "My what?"

Again he heard the soft noise that might have passed for laughter.

"Why, your solitude and boredom, of course." A rustling of robes and a gust of icy wind indicated the Dark One had moved nearer. "Your days must be empty and tedious, there in the great wilds of Sutherland."

"They are anything but – as well you know!" Hardwick's temper broke. "I have seen your minions scurrying about, watching me. I did no' come here to dance around the fire with you. I want two boons and I'm no' leaving until you grant them."

"You dare?"

The Dark One's voice thundered through the inner sanctum, followed almost immediately by a loud noise reminiscent of Mac slapping his knee.

Around the sentry-like trees, the maze of exposed roots swiftly shifted into a troop of crouching, hissing dragons. Pushing up on their scaly, long-clawed feet, they swung black-glittering heads in Hardwick's direction. Their angry, red eyes and slashing tails left no

doubt that they didn't take kindly to boon-seekers.

"Have done, my beasts!" The Dark One showed himself briefly, his tall, imposing form appearing silhouetted in the open temple doorway as he flung a berobed arm at the root dragons. "Sleep until you are summoned!"

At once, the creatures vanished, leaving a tangle of harmless-looking roots in their wake.

"So, Seagrave!" The Dark One's voice came again from within his sheltering temple.

The still-lit arch of his doorway loomed empty.

"What boons would you have? Now, after the generosity I showed you before?"

"I am a different man than when I last stood before you." Hardwick folded his arms, unwilling to bend. "As such, I have different needs."

"Needs great enough to bring you here?"

Hardwick squared his shoulders, prepared to give his all. "They are important enough for me to offer everything you required of me now, before the end of my testing period."

He could almost see the Dark One's brow arching again.

He wasn't prepared for the long stretch of silence.

A quiet peppered with a noise that sounded very much like a man scratching his beard.

Almost as if he were mulling.

Hardwick frowned.

Good things weren't known to come when the Dark One considered.

"Tell me, Seagrave, do these *boons* have aught to do with the maid?"

"You know that they do."

The Dark One reappeared on the threshold, a silent wind whipping his robes. "There is naught I do not know."

Anger flamed through Hardwick. With surety, the Dark One's hags had extolled on all they'd witnessed in Dunroamin's vaulted undercroft.

"Do not forget I was once a man." The Dark One's words proved the hags had spoken.

Hardwick set his jaw. He didn't care if the fiend had once been ten flesh-and-blood men.

"We were all once men and still are. In whate'er form allowed us," he snarled, curling one hand around his sword hilt and tightening the fingers of the other on the handgrip of his shield. "What I want from you is one night to lie with Cilla, to truly take her as befitting two who love." He took a few steps closer, his gaze on the black

silhouette in the temple doorway. "I want your word to leave Dunroamin in peace. I'll no' have your hags manifesting there again."

"Indeed?" The Dark One appeared to study his knuckles. "You forget that you are not in a position to make such demands." He paused as a gust of wind raced through the trees. "Still, I shall speak with the ladies."

"Ladies?" Hardwick nearly choked. "They are as fiendish as you."

The Dark One sent him a reproving stare.

He felt it to his bones.

"They were but overeager." The Dark One took their side. "They, too, once knew love and have missed it."

"And my boons?"

"Done."

"What?" Hardwick's eyes flew wide.

Relief washed over him. Triumph, hot and sweet, nearly buckled his knees.

Until the Dark One raised a quelling hand. "Done, that is, after you've mastered one last proving."

Hardwick's heart plummeted. "Is it no' enough that I'm offering you my soul? Now, well before the year and a day you required?"

He wasn't sure, but he'd swear the Dark One shrugged.

"'Tis a grave matter, Seagrave." His deep voice filled the inner sanctum. "You ask me to grant you a night of bliss with your lady and" – there came that soft chuckle again – "then deny my ladies their pleasure. Yet all can be arranged if you are willing."

Hardwick crossed his arms. "Name your price."

"Your lady's soul."

"That's madness!" Hardwick stared into the mist, not surprised that it'd thickened again, blotting the Dark One and his temple from view.

"Your choice, Seagrave." The voice came from within the temple walls. "One night of pleasure, Dunroamin left in its plaid-draped innocence, and – the price – Cilla Swanner's soul."

"Nae!" Hardwick roared the denial.

Then he was falling, twirling and tumbling through a deep black tunnel that seemed bottomless. Down and down he spiraled, cold winds tearing at his kilt and whipping his hair.

And as the darkness rushed to claim him, one word slid round his heart, giving him comfort.

Cilla.

Chapter Fifteen

Several evenings later, Cilla perched on the edge of a plaid-covered sofa in a back corner of Dunroamin's heavily tartanized library. Flickering candles glowed everywhere, the only lighting Uncle Mac allowed in the room. Standing candelabrums, wall sconces, and table candles; each one cast golden pools of light, adding ambiance to the night's event.

A 'Meet and Greet the Author' affair, featuring Wee Hughie MacSporran, the Highland Storyweaver.

Cilla watched and listened to him, trying to appear interested.

In truth, she was only surprised.

The tall, teddy bear-ish man lecturing at a podium near the library's black marble fireplace was everything she hadn't expected.

She leaned into Hardwick, sitting beside her. "I thought he was a renowned ladies' man?"

"So folk say." Hardwick shrugged. "Whate'er he has, I do no' see it. Or" - he cocked a wicked brow – "perhaps he is skilled at giving Highland kisses?"

Cilla bit back a smile. "Somehow I doubt that."

Although at least six foot four, Wee Hughie appeared well-pudged rather than well-muscled. Even his scholarly high forehead and thinning auburn hair couldn't keep his round, apple-red cheeks from giving him a jolly air. Unfortunately, his cheeriness was dimmed by his tendency to strut like a peacock.

"Time is of little importance in the Highlands," he was saying, his burr well-buttered, almost a touch too smooth. The words rolled, as if he'd said them again and again. "Our hills are a magical place of picturesque beauty, languorous and seductive."

He paused, casting a meaningful look at the little cluster of Australian women who made up his entourage and had claimed front-row seats.

"Scotland, the whole world knows, is a place where you can believe the distant past happened only yesterday, and the faraway and long ago is not lost at all but waiting to be discovered by those with eyes to see."

He looked round, baiting his audience. "Do *you* have such eyes?"

A round of quiet nods from Dunroamin's residents answered him, while his Aussies, all sporting Official Kilt Inspector jackets, oohed and aahed agreement.

Beside Cilla, Hardwick snorted.

She slid a glance at him. "You really don't like him, do you?"

"I dinnae like windbags." He folded his arms. "Such fools annoy me more than a pebble in my shoe."

He glanced toward the windows, appearing to eye the approaching rain clouds. But not before Cilla caught a twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"I saw that." She nudged him, relieved to see the recent harsh lines in his face soften, if only for a moment. "You think he's funny?"

"I think his head is so swollen it's a wonder he can walk through a door." He kept his voice low, his gaze still on the windows.

His face was hard-set, almost expressionless. Much as it'd been ever since he'd returned from his mysterious visit to the Dark One and announced he'd met with failure.

Cilla frowned and reached for his hand, twining their fingers before he could pull away. "You should have stayed in bed." She leaned close, dropping her voice. "Uncle Mac said you could have the room as long you needed. He thinks you're ill from walking his moors at night, believes you took a chill. He doesn't know that it's-"

"The Dark One's warning taste of what awaits me when my time runs out?" Now he did look at her, his dark eyes glinting in the candlelight. His tone held a tinge of bitterness. "And I've no' been using Mac's kindly proffered quarters to sleep. I've been out on the moors with my lads every e'en. We're still looking for the Viking ghosties."

"Maybe there aren't any?"

"Ach, there's something about, for sure." He waited as Honoria bustled past offering scones and shortbread. "Whoe'er they are, they've been lying low. But we're on to them. As for me" – he dutifully took a piece of shortbread when the housekeeper passed by a second time – "the queasiness or whate'er it is the Dark One inflicted on me will pass. It takes more than a spell of dizziness to slow down a Highlander."

His gaze flicked to a tartan-covered wing chair not far from where they sat. "I wouldn't have missed tonight's performance for all the haggis in Scotland."

For one brief moment, his face lightened and he looked just as devilishly roguish as before his disappointing visit to the Dark One. Certainly as toe-curlingly handsome, not that now was the time to let her mind wander in that direction.

So she smoothed her skirt and, for the sake of her aunt and uncle, attempted to feign appreciation in the evening's entertainment.

For sure, Wee Hughie was a showman.

His kilt swishing smartly, he paced in front of the fireplace, his chest swelled and his shoulders proud. "I've the blood of a thousand

kings in my veins," he boasted, pausing for an effective moment. "My lineage dates back over two thousand years. From the legendary Celtic High King, Conn of the Hundred Battles, reaching to third-century Ireland and the days of the Sidhe, the famed Tuatha De Danann, to" – he cleared his throat meaningfully – "our great warrior king, Robert the Bruce, and many more."

Picking up his book, *Royal Roots*, he raised the tome high, holding it round for all to see. "Now, with the help of my book or my freelance researching services, you, too, can uncover the truth of your own ancestral story. Perhaps you will find the likes of great kings and nobles. As I've done for countless satisfied clients, I can take you step by step through the process, showing you-"

A wild skirl of pipes ripped through the library, the Celtic blast shaking the walls and rattling teacups.

"Aaaaagh!" Wee Hughie lurched backward, arms wheeling as the pipe tune – "Paddy's Leather Breeches" – blared again, even louder than before.

"Blazing heather!" Honoria jumped, dropping the tray of scones and shortbread.

Colonel Darling waved his pipe in the air. "It's that bloody pterodactyl! Mark my words."

"Pterodactyl schmocktyl! That's my tune!" Uncle Mac laughed, grinning ear to ear.

Next to Cilla, Hardwick pretended not to notice the clamor.

And in the tartan-covered wing chair nearby, a big burly Highlander with a shock of auburn hair and a bushy beard slapped his kilted thigh and nearly convulsed with laughter.

Looking their way, he grinned and nodded in greeting. Then, as the tune skirled on, getting louder by the minute, he started tapping his foot. Still beaming, he lifted his hands to mimic the motions of a piper's lively fingers.

Cilla stared at him. Her jaw slipped.

Heart pounding, she whipped around to face Hardwick. He had the good grace to look a touch guilty.

"I know him!" She grabbed his arm, squeezing. "He's the ghost- … er … the *man* who appeared so suddenly before me in the corridor when I first arrived."

As if to confirm it, the big Highlander jumped to his feet and cut her a jaunty bow.

"Bran of Barra, my lady." He touched two fingers to his temple in salute. "The MacNeil of MacNeil, no less."

"Cilla Swanner." She replied without thinking. "Yardley, Pennsylvania."

"Another fair Ameri-cain!" He grinned, looking most pleased

with his observation. He flashed a bold glance at Hardwick. "Can it get any better, my friend? Nae" - he slapped his thigh again – "I say it cannae!"

Cilla blinked, not understanding their exchange.

She did look back and forth between the two, vaguely aware of Uncle Mac and Colonel Darling dashing about the library peeking under chairs and behind curtains as they searched for the source of the music.

At last she remembered something that had been niggling at her. She nudged Hardwick. "Uncle Mac only has the armory rigged with that tune. It's timed to start at the end of his afternoon naps."

She raised her voice above the screaming pipes. "What's playing is the pipe CD Aunt Birdie keeps in her car."

"Or not." Hardwick's gaze slid to his friend.

Sitting again, Bran of Barra had his legs stretched out comfortably on the wing chair's ottoman, and his arms crossed over his broad, plaid-draped chest.

"What do you mean 'or not?'" Cilla tugged on Hardwick's arm.

He flicked a speck of lint off his kilt. Then he aimed a telling glance at Wee Hughie.

"It could be that Bran wished to enliven the evening." He couldn't quite keep his lips from twitching. "His humor has been known to run away with him."

"And yours?" She poked him. "Don't tell me you didn't have a hand in it."

"Ach, well…" He didn't deny it. "Bran and the lads have been working hard out on the moors. They deserved a bit o' levity."

Her eyes rounded. "They?"

He looked at her. "You don't really think that's your aunt's pipe CD playing so robustly, or do you?"

"More ghosts?" Cilla glanced about, seeing none.

"Och, you willnae be seeing them." He slid an arm around her, pulling her close. "Some of the lads are a bit shy about showing themselves, but there's a mean piper or two amongst them. Bran and I gave them the evening off from Mac's peat fields to do a spot of playing here."

"To spoil Wee Hughie's presentation?" Cilla's own lips quirked.

"His Kilt Inspectors will make it up to him." He pulled her closer, dropped a kiss to her brow. "I'll have the lads wind down in a beat. It's about time they head back out on patrol anyway. The scent of men guising themselves as Vikings has been heavy on the air of late. Could be we're closing in on the dastards."

Twisting round, he jerked a nod at the heavy red plaid drapes

that framed the library's corner windows.

"Paddy's Leather Breeches" faded at once.

And although Cilla hadn't seen them, she felt a cold air current sweep by as they departed.

"They're gone?" She snuggled against Hardwick, amazed as always by his warmth and rock-hard solidity.

"Aye, they're away now." He was watching Wee Hughie again, studying the man with narrowed eyes. "Bran and I are the only ghosts left standing, so to speak."

Cilla bit back a sigh.

Although his moods had been dark as thunder since returning from the Dark One, he'd never seemed less ghostly. She closed her eyes for a moment, memories of every minute they'd had together, assailing her from all sides. She wanted to capture every one of them, to make more, and always be where she was right now: with the man she loved above all else.

Even her own life, truth be told.

Heaven help her when the time came to say goodbye.

Not wanting to think about how their farewell would split her, she took a deep breath and steeled herself. Then she sat up straighter and followed Hardwick's gaze, hoping Wee Hughie's lecture would take her mind off of how swiftly the summer was passing.

Unfortunately, in following Hardwick's gaze, her own snagged on a shadow in the corner behind the library's black marble fireplace

Or, more aptly, two shadows.

Over there was Gudrid, the tall and stately blond Viking ghost whose long, thick braid and rich, deep red-purple and blue clothing Cilla instantly recognized. She stood with the fair-haired giant of a helmed Norse warrior she knew went by the name of Sea-Strider.

Cilla stared at the ghostly pair, her pulse kicking into overdrive. The roar of her blood in her ears almost drowned out Wee Hughie's droning voice.

The couple looked right at her, and she knew instinctively that no one else saw them. She flashed a glance at Hardwick and, sure enough, he didn't seem to notice them.

Turning back to the couple, Cilla knew they had a very good reason for being here. She just wished she could figure it out this time.

It wasn't easy.

Sea-Strider stood unmoving as ever, a good pace behind his blond-braided woman. Though not exactly frowning, his face was etched in hard, solemn lines. And as he scanned the ranks of those sitting about Dunroamin's candlelit library, he held fast to his large painted shield and nine-foot spear.

Cilla's chest tightened, the breath she'd been about to exhale lodging in her throat. She fisted her hands in her lap, willing the ghosts to reveal their message. But Gudrid's lips weren't moving, though her eyes looked sad and beseeching.

Sea-Strider seemed to have turned his attention on Wee Hughie, his stare steady and intense.

"My repertoire of Scottish tales is rich and vast," the Highland Storyweaver was saying, lifting his voice to fill the library. "Having enjoyed a sampling of them, perhaps you have a special theme you'd like me to expound on? A query about a clan ancestor?"

He looked around, one brow arching in expectation.

When no one spoke, he lifted a hand to his mouth and coughed behind it. "If there are no questions, I'll end the evening by apologizing for having to postpone my talk. It was kind of the laird" – he gave Uncle Mac a nod – "not to complain that I couldn't hold the tea talk a few weeks ago as originally planned."

"Tell them why." One of his Aussies leaned forward, gushing. "Maybe they don't know…"

The expressions on the faces of the two Norse ghosts sharpened.

They drifted nearer.

"I assumed they did know." Wee Hughie's back straightened. "All the newspapers in northern Scotland carried the news."

"Harrumph!" Uncle Mac swelled his chest. "I know everything that goes on in these hills."

Wee Hughie took the bait. "Then you'll have heard that on the evening I was to speak here, I was called to Balnakeil." He rummaged in a green satchel on one of the book tables, producing a shiny mason's trowel. "I was there to accept this Marshalltown Archaeology Trowel in honor of the attention several of my talks brought to the Viking burial at Balnakeil Bay."

Stepping closer to the audience, he held out the trowel for their inspection. He took care to display the pointy, flat-bladed tool so that everyone could see HIGHLAND STORYWEAVER etched on the steel.

Hardwick sat forward, his gaze on the trowel.

He shot a glance at his friend, Bran. But the jovial Highlander didn't notice. His attention, too, appeared riveted on Wee Hughie.

Oblivious to their scrutiny, Wee Hughie droned on. "The tourist numbers at Balnakeil have increased more than three-fold since I've educated the public to the wealth of Viking burials and ruins along our northern coasts."

He paused, his voice taking on a boastful tone. "Indeed, I'll soon be journeying to Shetland to inspect a Viking-related find there.

The site is on St. Ninian's Isle. It's a lovely place, but it's also a site overlooked by many."

"Eh? And you're for changing all that?" Uncle Mac eyed him from beneath down-drawn brows. "There's some that appreciate left-alone places, just!"

Wee Hughie reddened.

"The people of Shetland have asked me to help them attract visitors." He looked round, as if expecting applause. "The site was first discovered in the 1950s. It will be a privilege to alert the public to-"

"What's a Viking-related find?" The question leapt off Cilla's tongue before she realized she'd formed it.

Across the room, the blond-braided woman and her Sea-Strider nodded significantly.

Then they joined hands, smiling. Their expressions lighter, they held Cilla's gaze, looking as if a great burden had been lifted from their shoulders.

In a wink, they vanished.

Chills swept down Cilla's spine. She blinked and moistened her lips, certain now that the Viking pair were so-called messenger ghosts. The kind that appear again and again until someone understands what's burdening them and their unfinished earthly business is resolved.

At the front of the library, Wee Hughie drew a breath for his answer. "A Viking-related find," he explained, setting down his trowel, "is an archeological site that isn't necessarily of Viking origin but that has been influenced by them in some way."

"Such as?" Cilla sat forward, compelled to probe. In her mind she could still see the Norse pair watching her, their smiles and nods encouraging her. "I'd like an example."

Wee Hughie rolled his shoulders, eager to oblige. "The Balnakeil burial, a youth's grave, is a clear-cut Viking archeological site. It dates to the ninth or tenth century, when the Norse frequently raided our coasts. The grave goods found with the lad were typical Viking wares."

He took a glass of water off the table, draining it. "The St. Ninian's site in Shetland is different," he continued, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "The ruins there are of an early Celtic church and, as such, are worthy of any visitor's time. What makes St. Ninian's unique is the spectacular hoard of Pictish treasure that was discovered beneath a stone slab in the chapel grounds."

"Buried treasure?" Cilla's eyes widened. She could almost see Gudrid and Sea-Strider beaming.

Beside her, Hardwick swore.

He shot a terse look at Bran, and made a jerky gesture with his clenched fist.

"Aye, you could say buried treasure." Wee Hughie basked in the attention. "St. Ninian's gave up one of the most fabulous stashes of Celtic silver ever to be found in the British Isles. A boy discovered the hoard, uncovering a wooden box brimming with silver bowls and brooches, sword hilts and trappings, pins, spoons, and innumerable objects yet to be identified, all more dear than a king's ransom."

"And the Vikings?" Cilla didn't turn her head, but knew without looking that Hardwick was scowling. "What did they have to do with it?"

"Everything." Wee Hughie preened. "Without them, the treasure would never have lain hidden for hundreds of years."

Cilla darted a glance to where the Viking pair had stood, her heart thumping.

She looked back at Wee Hughie. "How so?"

"It's like this…" He raised a learned finger. "The hoard is believed to have been buried in the mid-ninth century, a time when Viking raids were particularly ferocious. Many scholars support the theory that when Viking sails were spotted on the horizon, the treasure was buried to avoid detection."

Cilla nodded, sure she was on to something.

Hardwick was still grumbling. Angry Gaelic words that sounded like curses.

"There are" - Wee Hughie accepted a fresh glass of water from Honoria – "other possibilities, including that the Vikings themselves might have buried the hoard, hoping to keep looted goods safe from other raiders."

Cilla let out a breath. "So that's why you called it a Viking-related site."

"Exactly." Wee Hughie nodded. "Such sites abound in Scotland. The possibility of happening across such a treasure, hidden by peat or sand dunes for centuries, is what makes archeology so exciting."

It was then that Cilla noticed Hardwick and Bran were gone.

Shooting to her feet, she glanced round, Vikings and Wee Hughie forgotten. Hardwick had warned that the Dark One might claim him any moment. If he'd been zapped away now, while she'd been talking about buried treasure to a man who called himself the Highland Storyweaver, she'd never forgive herself.

"He went that way, dear." Flora Duthie indicated the open library door.

Cilla started at the tiny woman's words, ashamed she'd almost plowed right into her.

Unfazed, Flora caned her way nearer, a plate holding two large jam-and-cream-filled scones clutched in her free hand. "I saw him go past when I fetched my tea scones."

"Thank you." Cilla turned toward the door.

Flora thrust out her cane, blocking her path. "Have a care, child," she tsked, shaking her head. "He looked mighty angry, he did."

"I can handle him." Cilla smiled reassurance as the old woman lowered her cane. "It's not me he's mad at."

Ignoring her aunt and uncle's glances, she pushed her way through the Kilt Inspectors who were now gathering around their hero's book table, fawning and squealing.

They could have their red-cheeked raconteur.

She had to find Hardwick.

She paused outside the library door, peering both ways down the long and dim corridor. Retreating footsteps, rapid and masculine, gave a clue from the shadows to her left. She raced down the passageway, but Hardwick was nowhere to be seen.

Hurrying out the castle's massive front door, she dashed down the steps to the graveled drive and gardens. Her gaze darting everywhere, she sprinted across the wet lawn, making for the moorland and the dark edge of Uncle Mac's peat fields.

She'd only covered a few yards before Hardwick stepped out from behind a thicket of dripping rhododendrons.

"Whoa, lassie." He grabbed her arm, pulling her roughly against his chest. "You're no' going anywhere."

"I thought the Dark One had taken you." She clung to him, slinging her arms around his neck and thrusting her fingers into his hair, holding tight. "The Viking pair, the ghosts I saw, were there, in the library. When you disappeared, I thought they'd come to warn me that your time here was over."

His brows shot upward. "The Viking pair? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I just did." She choked on the words, twisting her fingers deeper into his hair. "I knew they were there for a reason and when I saw you couldn't see them I feared it had something to do with you. Now, after hearing Wee Hughie-"

"Enough." His mouth swooped down on hers, hard and silencing. He tightened his arms around her, almost as if he feared she'd vanish if he didn't hold her so fiercely.

"I heard MacSporran and I'll no' have you with me tonight." He slanted his mouth over hers again, this time parting her lips with his tongue and thrusting deep. He kissed her mercilessly, as if he couldn't get enough of her. His tongue slid furiously over and around

hers, plunging and withdrawing again and again until she went pliant in his arms and he broke the kiss.

He set her from him, his breath coming in hard, fast pants. "I'm away to the moors to join Bran and the lads." He looked down at her, his eyes still dark with passion, almost blazing. "Now go back to the castle. I'll no' have you coming with me."

"Why not?" She lifted her chin. After such a kiss, and the odd feeling that he meant it as their last, she wasn't about to return to Dunroamin.

"Dinnae trouble yourself with why." He cupped her face with his large hands, frowned down at her. "You'll go because I said so."

"Oh, yeah?" Cilla bristled. "That might have worked in the fourteenth century, but it won't with me." She folded her arms, stubborn. "Women do what they want these days."

"What do you want?" His eyes blazed hotter and his burr went all buttery-deep, its smoothness downright dangerous.

Cilla blinked. "I…" Her voice hitched, the damn tingles he always gave her making it impossible to think.

"Come, sweet." His gaze turned hotter, tracking slowly downward. "Tell me and I might oblige you – if you then head back inside."

"That's not fair." Cilla bit her lip, already falling prey to his magic.

"It is if it keeps you safe." He reached between them to inch up her skirt, sliding his hand up her thigh to cup and squeeze the panty-covered heat between her thighs.

"Tell me, lass." He leaned close, licking, then nibbling her ear. His fingers began to move, stroking her intimately. "Your every desire fulfilled…"

"You're trying to distract me."

"Am I no' then?" He lifted his head, looking at her.

"Of course, you are!" Cilla broke free, worry for him rising above the sensations he was stirring. "And I know why you want me gone. I saw your face when Wee Hughie started talking about Vikings. Your friend, Bran, was also upset."

His smile fading, he touched one finger to her clit and circled. Once, twice, and again before he pulled back his hand and stepped away from her.

"I would throw off my plaid and toss you down onto it and nibble on that tasty little sweet spot until there is no tomorrow," he vowed, his breath still harsh and his voice rough. "But now isnae the time or place and you need to leave."

"Hah!" Cilla flipped back her hair, hiding how limb-limbed he'd just made her. "I'm staying right here until I know what's going

on."

"'Tis a man's work." He crossed his arms. "I'll no' have you about if things get wild."

"Wild doesn't scare me."

"This kind of wild should." He remained firm.

"Then tell me why you and Bran disappeared from the library." She could do stubborn, too. "I'm not budging until I get the truth."

He frowned and shoved a hand through his hair. "The truth, lass, is that thanks to Bran and the lads' keen eyesight and, this e'en, Wee Hughie's blethering, Bran and I have guessed what Mac's Viking ghosties are after."

Cilla stared at him.

Her heart started pounding, fast and furious.

In her mind, she again saw Gudrid and Sea-Strider standing in a corner, nodding and smiling when Wee Hughie started talking about Norse archeological sites.

"Oh my God!" She clapped a hand to her cheek. "There's Celtic treasure buried in Uncle Mac's peat fields!"

Hardwick nodded. "Aye, that could be the way of it."

He glanced out over the moors, dark beneath drifting mist and low-hovering rain clouds.

"Some while ago Bran and the lads found a creel of tools hidden beneath an overhang in one of the peat bogs. They couldn't locate the basket a second time, or perhaps cravens moved it. But" – the corner of his mouth curved up – "Bran used his ghostly power to conjure one of the tools to show me what they'd found."

"One of Wee Hughie's Marshalltown Archaeology Trowels?" Cilla guessed.

"No' his own, mind." Hardwick's smile broadened. "But a tool like his, aye. The word *Marshalltown* was inscribed on it, for sure."

"So you think the ghosties are using their Viking disguises and the trowels to search for buried treasure in Uncle Mac's peat fields?"

"I do."

She understood now. "You're worried that if you catch them, there'll be a fight."

"We will get them. And, aye, we'll fight when we do. That's no' my concern."

"Then what is?"

He leaned close, looking in her eye. "That you might swoon if you were present and looking on when Bran, the lads, and I went wild."

"How wild?"

"Think naked, screaming men and swinging steel."

Her eyes widened. “I didn’t think of that.”

“So I knew.” He flashed his most wicked smile. “If you’ve ne’er seen a Highland charge, it isn’t a sight for the faint of heart. Especially when we’re after the kind thieving scoundrels who’re too lily-livered to show their own faces and creep about disguised as Viking ghosties.”

“Still…” Her pulse was racing. She’d read about the ferocity of Highland charges in history books. How bold and daring they were, the men often throwing off their plaids as they raced to fight their foes.

“I think I might like to see naked, sword-swinging Highlanders-” She broke off, blinking.

She’d been talking to thin air.

Hardwick had disappeared, leaving only his sexy sandalwood scent behind.

She glanced about to be certain. There was no mistake. Nothing moved anywhere near her except drifts of Highland mist. He really was gone. Even his scent was beginning to fade, its diminishing a sure sign he’d zapped himself to the moors.

Cilla frowned.

Then she started tapping her chin. She needed exactly ten seconds to make a decision.

And when she started walking, it wasn’t in the direction of Dunroamin’s front door.

If Hardwick got mad, so be it.

Chapter Sixteen

"You're certain it was this overhang?"

Hardwick peered at the cutaway ridge of blackest peat. No more than a four-foot-tall gash in the moorland, if it'd once held a creel of Marshalltown Archaeology Trowels, there wasn't a sign of such a basket now. Looking equally innocent, a thick fringe of grass hung down over the cutaway area's top edge.

He shot a glance at Bran, noting the stubborn set of his friend's jaw.

"There are hundreds of such overhangs on these moors. Natural ones and those cut by Mac's lads." He folded his arms. "I say we keep searching. Now that we know what we're after, there isn't time-"

"It was this overhang." Bran hooked his thumbs in his sword belt. "Could be I'm seeing something you don't!" He rocked back on his heels, grinning. "A wee detail I noticed earlier. Slipped my mind till now, it did."

Hardwick set his jaw, annoyed. But he did turn back to the peat overhang to give it a better stare.

"By thunder!" His brows snapped together. "There isn't any bog cotton."

"Just!" Bran thrust out an arm to indicate the delicate, white-topped heads of bog cotton dotting the moors as far as the eye could see. Tiny and shaped like candle flames, they dipped and bobbed in the wind, letting the peat fields look alive in a sea of dancing white.

Except above the overhang where they stood.

Hardwick's frown deepened. The longer he stared at the thick, bog cotton-less grass covering the peat cut-away, the more odd the overhang looked.

He threw another glance at Bran, seeing that his friend agreed.

As did Bran's fighting lads. Brawny, shaggy-maned Islesmen from Barra and few other Hebridean isles, they exchanged suspicious glances and drew closer, forming a tight ring around the black-glistening gash in the earth.

Swinging back towards the peat-cut, Hardwick whipped out his sword and used its tip to probe the grassy lip of the overhang. The fringe of grass shifted, a large chunk of loose earth and grasses tumbling onto his feet.

"Hah!" Bran yanked out his own blade, eyes flashing. "I knew there was something funny about that cut-away."

Grinning broadly, he leapt onto the overhang, sinking to his

knees in the soft, black earth. With gusto, he slid his blade along the rim of the overhang, easily lifting a good-sized clump of peaty grass.

"Have a care!" Hardwick warned as Bran's lads joined in, using dirk points to poke into the odd little mound. "If there's an ancient church foundation or a kist of treasure buried here, it's Mac's and I'll no' see us doing damage to it."

"Och! We're but flexing our muscles until the *ghosties* show their faces!" Bran laughed. "'Tis those cravens what'll take a beating from our broadswords and axes! No' the good Mac's-"

Thump … screech….!

Bran froze as his sword blade shrilled along something long and hard, its contours just visible beneath the now-thin layer of peat.

"A wall!" He jumped back, waving his sword in triumph. "'Tis just like up Shetland way - an old Celtic church filled with treasure!"

"'Tis a bag of sticks." Hardwick pulled the coarse linen sack out of the ground. "Nae, tools," he corrected, upturning the bag so that a rain of dirt-crusted shovels and spades tumbled out. "No' Marshalltown Archeology Trowels, but I'll wager the dastards have been using these to dig up Mac's peat."

"So say we all." One of the Barra men agreed, his words greeted with enthusiasm by his fellow Islesmen. "But where's the treasure?"

Hardwick set his hands on his hips and scanned the hills. Light as a northern night sky was in summer, wisps of earlier rain clouds and slow drifting mist kept the contour of the moors soft and indistinct, the hills slashed with patches of deep, impenetrable shadow.

He stroked his chin, considering.

"Whate'er it is, it has to be hereabouts." Bran rammed his blade into the earth, leaning heavily on the sword's flashy jewel-topped hilt. "The fiends will want their tools close to hand."

"Exactly." Hardwick couldn't agree more. "We just have to winkle it out."

He turned, then looked back, meeting the eager gazes of Bran's rough-looking Hebrideans.

"Somewhere out here there's some sort of ruin." He made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "An ancient church, a longhouse, a Viking grave, whate'er. I say we split up and search all the land within a hundred paces, eyes peeled for any grass-grown lump, bump, or hollow that looks odd."

He didn't say that he'd also be keeping an eye out for tall and shapely, golden beauty who could bewitch a man with one toss of her shining hair.

He couldn't shake the notion that she'd followed him.

Just thinking of her brought hot stirrings beneath his kilt. Even now, he'd swear he still carried the taste of her on his tongue, could imagine the heady scent of her hot, wet arousal.

He frowned. Now wasn't the time for lust. Nor the damnable dizziness that swept him each time such tempting images rose to torment him. A nuisance visited on him by the Dark One and a bleeding annoyance.

"Are we still for charging if the Viking ghosties put in an appearance?" The Barra man loomed before him, battle ax in hand.

Hardwick blinked, focusing. The waves of lust-dizziness, when they came, seemed to be taking longer to fade.

He knuckled his eyes. "The stalwart who first spots our foes shall whistle like a curlew." He glanced round. "I trust all can?"

Bran snorted.

His Hebrideans looked offended.

Hardwick swept up his sword, knowing a show of bravura would fire their blood.

"Barra!" They shouted Bran's war-cry, rattling swords or jabbing the air with long-bladed dirks.

"Then away with you!" Hardwick ran his own blade into its scabbard. "First curlew wheeple and we rally to charge!"

But hours later, after much tramping in circles and many more curses when an examined hump in the landscape proved to be just that - *a hump* – the men were still stamping about, their eyes yet keen but their spirits waning.

Ignoring his own worsening mood, Hardwick went down on one knee to inspect a suspicious gap in a hillock. He found himself peering into a foxhole. The wee creature hissed at him, teeth bared and hackles rising.

Hardwick pushed to his feet, swallowing his disappointment.

Who would've thought the night would unearth one small fox and not a trace of buried Celtic silver? No ravening Viking ghosties either. Though he'd bet his kilt they were near. He could taste their thievery on the air as sure as he carried Cilla's sweet, hot scent on his tongue.

Pushing on, he looked out across the moors and past the dark bulk of Dunroamin to the rocky headlands of the coast and the wide sweep of the Kyle. The water glittered, glass smooth and still, the same deep blue of her eyes.

He stopped and sucked in a breath, certain something was tracking along in the mist beside him. A presence determined to parallel his long strides.

Affecting an air of casualness, he lifted a hand, meaning to flick his fingers and conjure a brimming cup of ale. This he'd toss

back with pretended appreciation. Then he'd sleeve his lips and move on, seemingly unconcerned but with a ready hand resting on his sword hilt.

Unfortunately, the lingering effects of his lust-dizziness made the effort of conjure-flicking too great. He lowered his hand without trying.

He did think hard as to who might be following him.

The long-strided gait was too stealthy and masculine for it to be Cilla. And, praise the ancients, too sure-footed for one of the Dark One's tottering gaggle of gap-toothed, flat-breasted hell hags.

He shuddered.

Then he threw his plaid back over his shoulder and struck off toward the spot where he judged his pursuant to be hiding. He'd gone but a few paces when the drifting mist parted and a tall, fair-haired Viking stepped from the gap to stare at him. No Viking *ghostie*, but a true ghost, the man wore mail and carried a huge colorfully decorated shield and a nine-foot spear.

Hardwick stopped cold.

Ghost he may be, but with the exception of Bran and his other ghostly friends, he'd never grown wholly accustomed to running across others who dwelt in their mysterious, ethereal realm. Perhaps he'd need another seven hundred years, but for now, such encounters always startled him.

The Viking didn't share his reticence.

Striding closer, he raised his tall spear to point at a hillock to Hardwick's right. Half hidden behind a copse of thick-growing birch and whin, it was an area Hardwick hadn't yet explored.

In that moment a sharp bird call pierced the air. Hardwick whipped around to see Bran and his lads racing toward him. He flashed a glance to where the Viking had stood, but the man was gone.

The bird call came again.

Not the long, sweet trilling of a curlew, but the harsh, agitated squawks of a bonxie.

Auk, auk.

"Gregor!" Hardwick grinned and grabbed Bran's arm when his friend drew to a panting halt in front of him. "He's found something - look!"

Thrusting his sword tip toward the sky, Hardwick indicated the fierce-looking bird. Gregor sailed past high above them, his great wings spread wide.

"Come!" Hardwick started running. "Gregor's the second soul who's called a warning. Our *ghosties* are beyond yon hill!"

"Barra!" Bran yelled his slogan and pounded after Hardwick, waving his sword.

Auk, auk!

Gregor's cries grew louder as the men burst into the birchwood. Some threw off their plaids as they stormed past trees and crashed through underbrush. All drew weapons and shouted their slogans. They glanced upward frequently, using the circling, swooping bird as their guide until other men's voices – shouts and curses – blended with their own.

Bloodlust high and hearts pounding, they ran on, swinging steel and eager for the fight. But the sight that greeted them when they charged out of the wood set them to laughing.

"By all the wonders!" Bran rammed his blade into the earth, gaping.

Hardwick stared, too, but held fast to his sword.

The Islesmen, now naked to a man, stared in disbelief.

Their foes, guised indeed like store-bought Vikings, stood in the middle of an excavated longhouse, overflowing boxes and bulging sacks of silver artifacts littering the up-churned, peaty ground.

They huddled in a tight circle, clutching one arm over their heads and using the other to thrash the air above them.

The reason was plain to see.

"The bird is well trained, my friends," Hardwick warned the thieves. He strode forward, grinning broadly when Gregor made a particularly splendid pass. "One word and he'll be after more than just your heads."

"Call him off!" An English voice rose from the huddle. "He's already drawn blood!"

"If you think a bird's talons are sharp" – Hardwick glanced at Bran's Islesmen – "wait till you taste the bite of our steel."

"Swords?" The man twisted to face Hardwick, taking care not to leave his head uncovered. "You can't be serious. We're unarmed. You can see our weapons there, in the pile by the trees. They're made of wood or plastic. Toys, no more! We aren't here for sword fights."

Hardwick folded his arms. "Why you're here is obvious. As for us" – the naked Islesmen drew near, forming a stern-faced circle around the ruined longhouse – "my friends and I relish a good and bluidy round of swording. Truth is, it's been too many years since we've enjoyed one!"

Beside him, Bran lifted his blade and ran his thumb along the edge. A bead of red appeared and he leapt forward, thrusting the steel just beneath the nose of the nearest 'Viking.'

When he swaggered away, laughing, Gregor swooped down to perch on his shoulder.

"Be glad it was me what done that," he called to the blanch-faced Englishman. "Had it been one o' my lads here, your nose would

now be kissing your toes!"

"What kind of crazy heathens are you?" Another man grew bolder now that Gregor no longer grazed their heads. Older than the others, he had tatty, well-worn tweeds showing beneath his furred Viking vest. He aimed a superior stare at Hardwick. "I could have you arrested for threatening us."

Bran snorted.

Hardwick sheathed his blade and went to stand toe-to-toe with the man, clearly the group's leader. "I've no time to discuss your first comment. Though" – he let his gaze sweep the little clutch of costumed Englishmen – "there's plenty hereabouts who'd wonder more at a Sassenach guised as a Norseman than a Highlander carrying a sword!"

The man glared at him, his mouth pursed tight.

"As for arrests, 'tis you who ought be fearful." Hardwick bent to pick up a piece of black peat-stained wood that was clearly part of an ironbound oak chest. Holding it reverently, he turned back to the Viking 'ghostie.' "There are many witnesses of your nightly charades. Now that we also know the reason behind them, and where you stole your guises, ach, well…"

"No' to mention that you're doing your foul deeds on Mac MacGhee's lands." Bran plucked his dirk from beneath his belt and used its tip to pick at his fingernails. "There's some would hang a body for what you've done."

That silenced the man.

But the first one seemed to have recovered his courage. "Oh, I say! There's no law in Scotland against trekking across free moorland, no matter who owns it. We-"

"There's always been laws against thieving." Hardwick spoke over him. "Especially in the Highlands."

"We weren't stealing." The man jerked his head, glancing at the other 'ghosties' for confirmation.

When no one said anything, he blustered on, clearly improvising. "We're Viking scholars. Re-enactors, if you will. We chose these moors for our training because they're so remote and-"

"Filled with treasure?" Bran turned to one of the overflowing boxes of artifacts, scooping up a handful of silver amulets and necklaces made of brightly colored beads.

"In my travels, I've heard of such men as you." He returned the Norse jewelry to the box. "'Tis history thieves you are! Men who defile sites such as this and sell the plunder to the highest taker."

The tweedy man cleared his throat. "Now, see here. We've been researching this treasure for years." He whipped out a map board from beneath his Viking vest and waved it before him. "No one

knew of it until we stumbled across a fleeting mention in the Icelandic Sagas. Only through painstaking study and searching did we find its location."

He continued in an authoritative voice. "We plan to turn over every last artifact to the proper archeological authorities."

Hardwick cocked a brow. "As you surely mean to return Erlend Eggertson's red devil mask and the other Up Helly Aa costumes to the Galley Shed in Lerwick?"

He wasn't surprised when the Englishman flinched. Avoiding Hardwick's gaze, he looked down at his map board, his expression mulish.

He said nothing.

Not that he had to. Guilt stood all over him.

Hardwick grasped the man's tweed-and-leather-patched elbows, gripping tight. "Be glad this is no' an earlier time, my friend. You'd have already breathed your last if it were."

The man spluttered, his eyes rounding.

Hardwick released him, needing every shred of his strength to marshal his temper.

For two pins, he would have flicked his fingers and conjured a few lanterns and a cook fire, transforming the tumbled stones and churned earth of the ruined longhouse into the camp of a hard-riding party of wild and bloodthirsty clansmen. He'd make the air heavy with the tang of woodsmoke, onions, and rabbit stew, toss in the moist fug of spilled ale and damp evening mist. Above all, he'd summon a hanging tree with a rope slung round its stoutest branch.

Instead, he forced himself to remember where and *when* he was. He flashed a warning glance at Bran's Islesmen who looked more than eager to forget.

Even so, he drew his dirk. But unlike Bran who was again using his to whittle his fingernails, he held the well-honed knife with just enough menace to jelly the knees of a man who didn't know him well enough to realize that if he'd meant true harm, he'd no longer be living.

"I'd hear the tale of this treasure," he said, his voice deceptively soft.

Tweedy glanced up, wetting his lips. "It's a great treasure. A Viking-age hoard to rival any found in Great Britain to date."

Hardwick frowned. He didn't need to be told that. Just the goods visible at the top of the many brimming boxes and the overflow spilling out of the bulging sacks bespoke the find's worth.

Not to mention the value of the longhouse itself, which looked remarkably preserved, considering.

"Well?" He eyed the Englishman.

"Er … h'rr'mm … I told you. There was a brief notation in the Icelandic Sagas." The man clutched his map board to his chest. "Something about a Viking noblewoman named Gudrid who lived near Tongue and had fallen in love with a man her father considered beneath her."

He paused, shot a nervous glance at his companions.

"Go on." Hardwick's tone was stern.

"There isn't much else." The man's face reddened. "Only that she determined to run away with her lover despite her father's disapproval. The sagas hinted that the young man, called Sea-Strider, was a Viking raider and would bring plundered wealth to Tongue, which he and Gudrid hid at the longhouse of a trusted friend. It's believed they planned to use the treasure to finance a journey to Iceland to settle there, far from Gudrid's father's wrath."

"But they never made it." Hardwick frowned. It was an easy guess, the treasure still being here.

Tweedy shrugged. "The Sagas fell silent on their fate. We supposed something happened and Sea-Strider was lost at sea. We did" – the man's eyes brightened for a moment – "find mention of a Gudrid at Castle Varrich in the time period in question. That clue is what led us here."

"I see." Hardwick slid a look at Bran.

But his mind was on the tall blond Viking who'd appeared to him. His heart clenched at the man's fate. He looked around, half expecting to see Cilla peeking at him from behind a whin bush, but she was nowhere to seen. His chest tightened at her absence. He felt a sudden need for her, thinking of the star-crossed Vikings.

Remembering the Vikings, he flashed another look at the motley little group before him.

"Why did you burgle the Galley Shed?"

Tweedy flushed. "That was unfortunate, but-"

"Eh?" Bran edged closer, hand on his sword hilt.

"We didn't have the funds to purchase such costuming on our own." The man's chin lifted and his eyes glinted defiantly. "We only wanted to scare off any possible long noses until we recovered the treasure. We would have returned the costumes before Up Helly Aa."

"Indeed?" Hardwick cast another look at Bran. "I'm thinking you ought to return them sooner."

"Aye." Bran nodded. "I'd say now."

"Now?" Tweedy's voice went squeaky.

The first man pushed forward, eyes bulging. "What are you suggesting? This is the middle of nowhere."

"So it is." Bran agreed.

His Islesmen hooted and slapped naked thighs.

The ‘ghosties’ blanched.

“You can’t expect us to strip?” Tweedy’s voice rose. “We’re Englishmen, not Highland heathens!”

“Och, you shouldn’t have said that.” Hardwick shook his head. “You’ve left us no choice. To be sure, you’ll strip. It’s now a matter of Highland honor.”

Stepping back, he spread his legs and crossed his arms. He made sure a wicked heathen-like glint lit his eye. “Truth is we can’t carry all this treasure back to Dunroamin. We’ll have to leave it, and you, until I make it back to the castle and tell Mac we’ve found his ghosties. He and the local authorities can decide what to do with you.”

“He won’t be able to keep the treasure!” The first ‘ghostie’ pushed forward. “Not all of it. We can make a deal with you, cut you in-”

“I *am* in.” Hardwick glared him, not about to tell him that his treasure was Cilla. “My reward is catching you. And knowing that whate’er Mac gets out of it, he’ll have enough to patch his roof and then some.”

“We never meant the MacGhees any harm.” Tweedy tried to wheedle.

Hardwick ignored him. “My friends here” – he jerked his head at Bran’s Islesmen – “will keep you company as you wait for Mac’s return.”

“You can’t leave us here, naked!” Another English voice rose at the back of the ghostly cluster. “We’ll freeze.”

Hardwick shrugged. “You should have thought of that before you garbed yourselves in stolen clothes.”

“If you’re leaving your friends behind to guard us, why do we have to disrobe?” Tweedy tried again.

“Because” – Hardwick grinned – “it just might be that when my men see Mac and the local constabulary heading this way, well, it could be they’ll disappear.”

“Run off?” Tweedy slid a look at the naked Highlanders.

“Nae, disappear,” Hardwick repeated, drawing much mirth from the Islesmen.

“Wouldn’t that be something?” Bran laughed.

Then he clapped a hand on Hardwick’s shoulder, pushing him away from the Viking ‘ghosties’ and toward the nearby wood of birch and whins.

“See you to it, then,” he urged Hardwick. “Garb yourself and then go fetch Mac. Look to your lady.”

A short while later, Hardwick walked swiftly up to

Dunroamin's massive double oak doors, amazed by two things. One, although he hadn't realized, it was well into morning. The day's sun was already burning the mist off Dunroamin's lawn, the bright, slanting light almost hurting his eyes.

That was his second revelation.

He was almost certain Mac was right.

He'd indeed caught a fever or chill or some such bane while out patrolling the peat fields each night.

Either that, or, as was likely the way of it, the damnable dizzy spells he'd had since visiting the Dark One were growing worse. In all his centuries, nary an illness had plagued him. Indeed, he'd thought one of the advantages of ghostdom was always feeling fit.

Yet his head ached and throbbed with greater frequency. The odd ringing in his ears had bettered, but wasn't completely gone. He also felt like sleeping. A desire he hadn't really experienced since Seagrave days, when his life had been just that.

A life. A *human* life.

He reached for the door latch and paused, another thought stopping him. He'd walked the entire way back from the Viking longhouse.

An unthinkable botheration for a ghost, unless the ghost chanced to be a ghost-in-love and bearing tidings that would surely please his lady.

He'd simply forgotten to act ghostly.

His news was too important for his mind to have noted the long trudge across the moors.

He did catch Mac's booming voice coming from the conservatory the instant he let himself into the castle. Heading in that direction, he followed the delicious aroma of fried bacon, eggs, and sausages, eager to impart his news.

His heart thumped with the glory of a victor.

He quickened his pace.

Already, he could see the admiration in Cilla's eyes.

But when he reached the little glass-walled conservatory and burst into its sunny, greenery-filled space, hers were the only eyes not to flash in his direction.

Everyone else looked at him hopefully.

Even wee Leo cracked one eye to peer at him from where he sprawled in a patch of sunlight falling in through the tall windows.

Flora Duthie set down her teacup and angled her head, tipping her ear his way. Honoria paused in arranging packets of muesli on the sideboard near the door. Dusting her hands on her white starched apron, she turned his way. Like Flora, she tilted her head, her gaze expectant.

Others appeared equally keen.

It wasn't every day he strode in on their breakfast, after all.

Mac broke off a lively discourse with the colonel to jump to his feet. "I see the gleam in your eye!" He came forward, almost knocking over the potted coffee bean tree in his haste.

"Heigh-ho!" He grinned, grabbing Hardwick's arms. "Say me you caught my ghosties!"

"Aye – indeed!" Hardwick smiled back, distracted. Cilla always breakfasted with the residents. He knew her days better than his own.

Mac shook his arms. "Did you toast their feet on a wee bit o' dry sticks and bracken?"

"Nae." Hardwick brushed at his sleeve when Mac released him. "But swords and dirks were drawn."

"Were they in Viking costumes?" Violet Manyweathers slid a told-you-so-look at the colonel. "Caught red-handed?"

"That and more, my lady. Not only-"

Hardwick caught a shadow shift outside and thought it might be Cilla walking on the terrace. But it was only the sun nipping behind a cloud.

He turned back to Violet. "Not only were the miscreants dressed in stolen Up Helly Aa trappings, they were looting a longhouse they've excavated in a hidden corner of Mac's peat fields."

Mac's eyes rounded. "Faugh! A longhouse?" He flashed a glance at his wife. "Why, my moors have enough strewn rubble from ruined longhouses to repave half o' Inverness! The stones are from the houses of the Clearances. 'Tis the same all o'er Sutherland-"

Hardwick cleared his throat. "This isn't a Clearance-era longhouse. It's a Viking longhouse, fairly well preserved, and" – he couldn't keep his lips from twitching – "filled with what might be the richest hoard of Celtic and Viking age treasure to e'er be found in Britain."

Mac's jaw dropped. *"Treasure?"*

Birdie launched herself at him, nearly knocking him down in her excitement. "Mac! We're saved! Dunroamin is secure!"

Colonel Darling yanked a hankie from his pocket and loudly blew his nose. "I say! Who would have thought it?"

Violet began to cry.

Hardwick swallowed, his throat too tight for words. He stepped back, struggling against the ridiculous urge to throw his arms around every soul in the room and hug them tight, glorying in their triumph.

A victory that would be perfect if only Cilla shared it.

He glanced at the windows again, hoping he'd been mistaken

about the sun shadow. But he hadn't erred. The terrace was empty.

"Looks like I won't have to cane my way past drip buckets much longer!" Flora Duthie's twittering voice rose from a corner table.

Hardwick turned back to the room.

The tiny woman sniffed. "Is it really a great treasure?"

Hardwick nodded. "The greatest I've ever seen."

Save the sapphire of my lady's eyes.

His heart squeezed, and he cleared his throat again. "You'll be wanting to call in your constabulary," he said to Mac, his chest tightening at the telltale glistening on the laird's face. "Perhaps contact Erlend Eggertson in Lerwick. He'll help make arrangements to get the Up Helly Aa costumes back to Shetland."

"And the thieves?" Mac swiped his sleeve across his cheeks. "Are they still out on the moor? They'll no' be getting away?"

"Och, they'll be going nowhere." Hardwick grinned. "My friend Bran and his lads are guarding them. We stripped them naked as a bairn's bottom. If they run, they'll be doing so in all their shameful glory."

"Jumping haggis!" Mac hooted and punched Hardwick in the arm. "I knew I liked you! You're a man after my own heart!"

Hardwick's own heart pinched. Unbidden came the image of the Dark One's inner sanctum and the root dragons with their glittering black-scaled backs and swishing tails, their fiery red eyes and sulfurous breath. He imagined Cilla in their clutches, the hell hags cackling as the root dragons pulled her into their lair.

He blinked and the vision faded, the bright morning light in the conservatory making such a notion more than absurd.

Yet he knew it could happen.

A cold chill rushed up his spine. The conservatory seemed to fade around him, Mac's guffaws and the chatter of the residents dimming in his ears. He clenched his fists, fighting the dread building beneath his ribs.

Mac thrust his arms in the air and danced a little jig, laughing.

And *he* was surely worrying for naught.

Even so, he grabbed Mac's arm. "Where's Cilla?"

"Eh?" Mac grinned and swatted at his kilt. "Ach, she's just for sleeping in," he panted. "She'll be down soon."

Hardwick started to feel foolish until he caught the guarded look on Birdie's face. When she slid a furtive glance at Honoria and that one promptly began rearranging her muesli packets, he knew something was wrong.

"What is it?" Dread began to twist his guts. "Where is she?"

Mac slung an arm around his shoulders. "I told you, the

lassie's abed."

"Nae." Hardwick shook himself free. "I dinnae think she is."

The high color staining Birdie's and Honoria's faces said he'd guessed rightly.

"Out with it, ladies." He folded his arms. "I know she isnae here."

He could feel her absence like a rip in his soul.

"She went sightseeing." Honoria broke first, chin high and lying out her ears.

"Where?" A muscle ticked in Hardwick's jaw.

Birdie said nothing.

"If you know something" – Mac went to stand by her – "you'd best speak up."

"Oh, posh!" Birdie waved a flustered hand. "She didn't want anyone to know."

"Know what?" Hardwick and Mac spoke together.

"She's gone to Seagrave." Birdie sounded defensive. "She went to Robbie and Roddie's cottage last night, asking them to drive her. They left hours ago."

"Why didn't she ask me?" Mac's brow crinkled.

"Perhaps she knew you'd tag along on her coattails?" Birdie smiled sweetly. "She has things to attend there that she wishes to do alone."

"Humph." Mac frowned.

Hardwick's blood chilled. When Birdie opened her mouth again to argue with her husband, he used the opportunity to slip from the room.

He couldn't imagine why Cilla wanted to go to Seagrave. Whatever the reason, he didn't like it.

It was also dangerous.

There were other reasons beside his memories that had kept him from returning to his old home. The ruin's isolation, he'd been told, attracted unsavory souls.

Ghosts who used his home for revels and debauchery he didn't want Cilla to stumble into. He'd also heard that dredges of her time sometimes visited the site, appreciating its loneliness for their own foul purposes.

"Hellfire and damnation!" He stormed out of Dunroamin's heavy front door and scrunched his eyes against the blinding sunlight.

Where was soft Highland mist when a body needed it?

Scowling, he stomped down the broad stone steps, knowing there was only one thing he could do. He'd have to sift himself to Seagrave and fetch her.

He just hoped he wouldn't be too late.

Chapter Seventeen

'Tis a man's work.

Cilla remembered Hardwick's words as she approached his ruined home, Seagrave Castle, so silent on its high, windswept cliff. She also took a long, deep, breath. She needed strength and calm for she was about to tackle some serious women's work. Men didn't do what she was going to attempt. When it came down to it, only women were so daring, so determined in chasing their dreams.

Certain of it, she kept on, her steps brisk and sure.

Confidence was the key.

Only if she truly believed, would she have a chance of breaking through seven hundred years to reach the bard-wizard who'd cursed Hardwick. Villains always returned to the scene of their crimes. She hoped the evil druid held the pattern. Aunt Birdie had assured her that even if he hadn't, residue of such a dramatic event would have seeped into Seagrave's walls.

It would help her make contact.

But doing so wasn't easy.

Already she'd covered half of the long path to the imposing shell of Hardwick's former home. Oddly enough, she took comfort in the occasional tossed-aside soda can or water bottle, the bicycle tracks on the path.

The litter and signs of cyclists assured her that the ruins weren't as dangerous as they looked.

Other people came here.

So she kept on, rather than hurrying back along the coastal road to the fishing community of Cruden Bay where Robbie and Roddie had dropped her.

She had to be strong.

Her rock-iron will to contact the druid and urge him to undo the spell wouldn't let her give up.

Still, she couldn't stop a shiver. Seagrave wasn't your archetypical Scottish cliff-top ruin, all tumbled walls and romance, wheeling seabirds and piles of mossy, indistinguishable rubble.

The ruins were in-your-face formidable. Bold, stark, and soaring, they didn't look crumbled at all. Only bleak and derelict, with the roof missing and large black rectangles of emptiness indicating the onetime placement of doors and windows.

Cilla took another deep breath and adjusted the shoulder straps of her rucksack. Filled with her lunch and, more importantly, Aunt Birdie's spirit-conjuring goods, it was starting to get heavy.

So she veered off the track, pushing through to the heart of the ruin. A long, roofless corridor with many doors opening off both sides stretched before her. Eerie, damp, and earthy-smelling, it wasn't inviting. But she kept on until she reached an open space that had surely been a courtyard.

Choked with weeds and brambles, the entire area was dotted with clumps of fallen masonry. Huge, empty windows to the sea let in the light. Best of all, in the sheltered walls of the bailey, she'd be free of prying eyes.

She'd also be somewhat protected from the cold wind racing in off the North Sea. Heavy, white-capped waves pounded Seagrave's cliffs, the churning waters so different from the gentle, blue-swirling Kyle.

Satisfied, she went to one of the windows and placed her rucksack on its broad stone ledge.

Another deep breath, and she started arranging her spirit-conjuring goods. Two white candles, each carefully set inside glass jars because of the wind. A genuine fourteenth century oil lamp from the depths of Dunroamin's unused wing. Tiny and rusted, the lamp was ideal to evoke a sense of the distant past, or so Aunt Birdie had promised.

A little bottle of frankincense essential oil served the same purpose. Heart thumping, she hoisted herself onto the window ledge. Then she unscrewed the bottle's cap, dribbling a few drops onto the stone.

For good measure, she dabbed a bit of the oil to the tip of her nose.

Then she closed her eyes and tried to concentrate, imagining the wizard-bard as a small bent man, grizzled and gray, and carrying a lute.

Unfortunately, she only felt silly.

Her eyes snapped open, her hopes diminishing. Despite the two glass jars, the wind had blown out her candles. Worse, she'd not thought to return her matches to the rucksack and the little packet was now gone.

The wind had surely swept the matches right down into the North Sea.

Damn.

Aunt Birdie had insisted the white candles were crucial.

Now she couldn't relight them.

Frustration tightened her chest. For a moment, her eyes stung and her view of the tossing sea went blurry. She blinked hard until her vision cleared.

Then she picked up the little medieval crusie lamp, holding it

tight. She focused on the druid, willing him to appear.

Nothing happened.

She breathed deep. Long, slow breaths to soak up the ancient scent of the frankincense. But all she inhaled was the tang of the sea and black, limpet-crusted boulders. Wet grass and a pungent waft of something she suspected was strongly related to the many lobster traps and fishing nets at nearby Cruden Bay.

The frankincense couldn't compete.

Instead of feeling transported, she felt ridiculous.

The druid wasn't here, wasn't reachable, or just didn't care.

She'd likely been doomed before she'd even put her spirit-conjuring tools into her bag. Knowing defeat when it stood before her, she sighed.

It was then that she saw the man on the far side of the bailey.

"Oh!" She stared, her eyes rounding.

Tall, clad in black, and handsome in a roguish sort of way, he could've been a Scottish biker. He'd folded his arms and was leaning against the arch of one of the empty door openings.

He clearly wasn't a medieval druid.

Trying to look as if she encountered dark-clad mystery men in castle ruins all the time, she hopped down from the window and dusted her hands.

"Nice day for a walk, h'mmm?" She tried for casual.

He said nothing.

She forced a friendly American smile, but let her mind race to what she could use as a weapon. Maybe the jagged edge of one of the candle jars if she smashed it quickly enough. *Does frankincense essential oil temporarily blind people if it's dashed in their face?* She wondered.

He just kept studying her, a slight smile quirking his lips.

Cilla dropped her own smile. Politeness wasn't working.

She stood straighter, aiming for calm. "Are you from around here?"

"Scotland?" His deep burr said that he was. "Aye, so I was, once."

Cilla's nape prickled. She didn't like the way he'd said that.

"Once?"

He glanced aside, and she saw that he'd tied his sleek raven-black hair in a shoulder-skimming ponytail.

"Aye, once." His smile faded. "'Twas long ago and a time best forgotten."

"'Twas?" Cilla glanced at the candle jars, wondering if she could spring for them.

It was one thing for Hardwick to use the occasional 'tisey and

‘twasey. This guy looked too modern for such language.

She backed against the wall, resting her elbow on the window ledge in a hopefully innocent-looking gesture. Even if she didn’t have time to smash a candle jar, she could use one to bop him on the head if need be.

She almost choked at the thought.

He was powerfully muscled, certainly Hardwick’s equal in strength or close to it. It was also a pretty good bet that he’d be fast on his feet. As for the damage his hands could do, she didn’t even want to consider it.

“I think I’ll be going.” She slid a look down the long door-and-window-filled corridor.

A dark passage of shadows and the sense of strange little creatures darting here and there, flitting just out of sight before the eye could catch them. Worse, the short distance to its entry seemed like a hundred miles, maybe even as far as the moon.

Her mouth went dry, the need to be gone beating inside her.

Her fingers stretched for the candle jar.

The Scot’s hand snapped around her wrist. He’d moved before she could blink.

“Hey!” She tried to yank free.

He smiled again, his grip like iron.

“The candles wouldn’t have worked.” He released her but loomed before her, blocking her escape. “No’ as you meant to use them.” He rubbed his chin as he eyed her spirit-conjuring goods. “They would have shielded you, though.”

“Shielded me?” Was that high-pitched squeak her voice?

“Aye, they’d have protected you.” He leaned in, his gaze piercing hers. “If they were still burning.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She grabbed her candle jars and the frankincense bottle and stuffed everything in her rucksack.

It would serve as a weapon if swung deftly.

Another slight smile quirked his lips. “Ach, you know well enough, Cilla.”

His words jellied her knees.

He knew her name.

She caught her breath, heart thumping. “How do you know who I am?”

“How is it that you dinnae know who I am?” He angled his head, looking at her. “I thought you would’ve guessed by now.”

“I can’t know you.” Cilla tightened her grip on her rucksack, making ready to swing. “I think you heard Robbie and Roddie use my name when we stopped for tea in Collieston. There were other people

in the tea shop. You could have been one of them."

"Ah, but you disappoint me." He clucked his tongue. "To think I troubled myself to come here."

"You needn't have bothered. And you can have the place to yourself." She started away. "I'm leaving."

"Without hearing what I've done for you?"

Something in his tone stopped her. "I know you're not the minstrel."

"The druid-bard?" He laughed softly. "I could be him if you wished. Nothing is impossible."

Cilla's pulse skittered.

Slowly, she turned.

He stood at the window, facing her. His tall, broad-shouldered form was limned dark against the twilit sea. He really did look like a biker. The bad, and dangerous kind. And something about the way he angled his head chilled her to the soul.

She was sure she'd seen him before.

"Indeed, I have many guises, lady." He spoke casually, his smile flashing white in the shadows.

"Oh, my God!" Her eyes flew wide. "You're him! The red devil face at my window!"

She'd known the face had been real.

He clapped a hand to his heart and gave a mock wince. "Recognized at last, though I must own that I am no' himself, nae. Merely a favored keeper of a small corner of his boundless dominion."

Cilla stared at him, her blood running cold. "But the mask-"

"The mask and that wretched bird's meddling ruined what was meant as a warning to Seagrave." Annoyance flickered across his face. "I wanted him to know how close I could come to you."

He glanced out at the sea, then back at her. "Had I bothered to look deeper into the goings-on at Dunroamin I would have foreseen Gregor's interference with the Up Helly Aa mask and chosen another guise. As it was, some of my root dragons were causing havoc at the time, misbehaving. My mind was otherwise occupied."

"Root dragons?" Cilla swallowed, fear constricting her chest.

Up to now she'd believed he was just a loony. Now that he'd mentioned Hardwick, Dunroamin, and Gregor, she had little choice but to believe him.

He really was the devil's minion.

Worse, she could tell that he wasn't going to let her go until he'd had his say.

So she put back her shoulders, trying to look braver than she felt. "Why did you want Hardwick to see how close you could get to me?"

He leaned against the window ledge, crossing his legs at the ankles. "I meant to threaten him with your soul. He needed to see I could take it if I desired."

"Take my soul?"

"It was a consideration, aye."

Cilla stared at him, pretended bravura forgotten. "And now?"

"I chose otherwise." He flicked a pebble off the window ledge, watching as it fell to the sea. "I decided to return Seagrave's soul instead. So to speak, of course, considering his soul never left him. Only his life-"

"What?" Cilla's heart slammed into her ribs. She felt dizzy. The world seemed to still, the sea and the wind going silent. Cilla pressed a hand to her breast, aware only of the strange ringing in her ears, the words she wanted so badly to believe. "He's a real man again? You broke his curse?"

"You could put it that way, aye." He lifted a hand, examining his knuckles. "Remembering makes me wonder what possessed me. I ne'er did care for him."

"But-"

"Touch her and I'll kill you!" Hardwick burst into the courtyard, his sword drawn. "A thousand times if need be!"

"No more? You've lost your fierceness, Seagrave." The Dark One started forward, looking unconcerned.

"Hardwick!" Cilla ran between them, flinging her arms wide. Terror swept her, snagging her breath and making her chest burn. "No fighting, please! You're-"

"Stay back, lass!" Hardwick was already lunging.

It was too late.

Leaping forward, Hardwick grabbed Cilla, yanking her behind him. "You've no idea what he can do," he warned. "I have to fight him."

His nemesis gestured toward his sword. "You're welcome to try."

Hardwick released Cilla, hoped she'd have the sense to stay put. He kept his gaze on the Dark One, trying not to even blink. "Whate'er it takes," he spoke savagely.

If he had the strength.

He'd spent the best part of the day trying to sift himself to Seagrave. Time and again, he'd failed, only reaching the edge of Mac's lands. Until one last effort landed him sprawled on the peaty ground before his former home.

He'd heard Cilla at once, speaking from the depths of the ruin.

Now that he'd found her, he'd keep her from the fiend's

clutches if it was the last thing he did.

"Conjure a blade, Dark One." He narrowed his eyes, fury pounding through him. "Fight me like a man - if you dare!"

The Dark One leaned against the ledge of a window that had been one of Hardwick's favorites. He smiled, almost indulgently. "And I thought you'd come to end our enmities."

"A blade, you fiend." Hardwick advanced on him. "Fetch one."

"I can summon a thousand swords, if I wished." His enemy lifted a hand and the air filled with the rasp of steel being whipped from scabbards, the loud clangor of swords. "Alas" – the sounds faded – "I'm here for another reason."

"Name one good enough to keep me from running you through."

"Hardwick, no!" Cilla called out from the corner. "You don't understand. He-"

"He nae listened to reason," the Dark One spoke over her, flashed a glance her way. "He was aye hot-tempered."

Turning back to Hardwick, he sighed as if his patience waned. "You'd regret lifting your sword against me. In truth, it would serve you naught."

"No' to my mind." Hardwick raised his sword, kissing the hilt for luck. No matter the cost, the impossible odds, he'd send his foe back to the Otherworld.

A short death, he knew. The Dark One was immortal.

But a blow to him in a human guise would slow him down, buying Cilla time to flee.

"So you'd risk all?" The Dark One's gaze dipped to Hardwick's mud splattered kilt and the peat smears on his knees. "No' wise in your condition."

"My condition?" Hardwick glared at him.

The Dark One shrugged. "If you dinnae know-"

"I know I'll have your name etched in my sword's steel." Hardwick flung his left arm behind him, seizing Cilla's wrist when she tried to clutch at him. He pushed her back again, her presence, the danger she was in, maddening him.

He flashed a fierce glance at her, then looked back to his foe. "My blade craves your blood. It's been too long since her thirst's been quenched!"

Unfazed, the Dark One hitched his hip on the window ledge. "How long has it been since you've been a man?"

"A Highlander is aye a man." Hardwick stood straighter, pride thrumming through him. "No curse can take that away. No' even you, with all your dark magick and foulness."

"I am powerful, aye," the Dark One agreed.

"And your tongue asks senseless questions." Hardwick pointed the tip of his sword at the Dark One's chin. "I have an urge to cut it from you."

The fiend knew to the hour how long he hadn't been a flesh-and-blood man.

He wouldn't be baited.

Especially not in front of Cilla. With surety, not when she was crying.

He frowned, catching the brightness in her eyes out of the corner of his own. The way her lower lip quivered and her breathing seemed to have gone shallow.

"Don't you see?" She ran forward and grabbed his arms. "He's lifted the curse!" She shook him, her voice breaking. "You're whole again, as before! That's why he's here. He came to tell me."

"That cannae be." Hardwick dismissed the notion. "You forget I sifted myself here. Were I flesh-and-blood, I would no' have been able to do that."

"You'll ne'er be able to do it again." The Dark One spoke from the window, his deep voice echoing in the ruin. "Transporting yourself here used the last reserves of your otherworldly powers. They've been dwindling ever since you hurtled back to life through the redemption tunnel."

"'Hurtled back to life?'" Hardwick swung to face him, furious. "Ne'er have I heard such rot."

The Dark One arched a brow. "Perhaps because you were cursed and forbidden entry?"

"And after all these centuries, you sent me into such a miracle-spending place?" Hardwick tamped down the urge to cast aside his sword and smash the fiend's nose with his fist.

He didn't like seeing Cilla filled with false hope.

His temper rising, he sheathed his blade. His hands itched more, aching to pound his nemesis to a pulp. "I dinnae believe it." He glared at the fiend. "No' one word. I ken your trickery."

The Dark One looked him up and down. "Have you no' felt weak of late? Easily wearied and desiring mortal needs such as sleep and other pesky habits?" He paused to piece a speck of stone dust from his thigh. "Perhaps felt an appetite for Dunroamin's famed breakfasts?"

Hardwick set his jaw, not about to admit the like.

But the fiend's words were intriguing, even stirring hope in his weary, disbelieving soul.

It couldn't be.

Still…

As unobtrusively as he could, he slipped his sword hand behind his back and flicked his fingers to summon his shield.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, this time using more vigorous wriggles. But he failed anew. His shield didn't appear.

"You see, it's true." The Dark One's voice was smooth, triumphant. "So stop insulting me with your doubt - if you persist, I'll regret my largesse so much that I'll reverse your good fortune."

At his words, Cilla gasped. "No, please!"

"He's a master trickster, lass." Hardwick glanced at her, hating that she'd blanched. That the hand she'd pressed to her mouth trembled. She really did believe the whoreson. And that knotted his innards, making him ache to the marrow.

Learning the truth would shatter her.

The Dark One might have to power to undo any man's curse. But he wouldn't help him.

Not even if all the stars fell from the heavens.

"Close your ears to his lies, Cilla-lass. He wants to crush us."

"No, it's true." She pressed a fist to her heart, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I know it here."

"I wish it were so, sweet." A pain, sharp and stinging, squeezed Hardwick's heart.

He turned back to his foe. "If this is true, to what do I owe the honor?"

"Not yourself, be sure!"

"What then?"

The Dark One glanced aside, his gaze skimming out over the dark waters of the North Sea. When he again looked round, he wore a grieved expression so surprisingly sincere Hardwick almost felt sympathy for him.

Knowing better, he waited.

The Dark One pushed off the window ledge, a whiff of sulfur swirling around him. "It was your lady, Seagrave." He glanced at Cilla. "I should ne'er have gone to Dunroamin-"

"Nae!" The ground dipped beneath Hardwick's feet. His sword hand began to itch again. "Dinnae tell me you-"

"She can explain later." Impatience edged the Dark One's voice. "Press me and I shall leave you without an explanation. As is…" - he looked once more at the sea – "I'll own that it was no' wise for me to see her. She reminds me of someone I knew long ago. A woman-"

"A lady you loved and lost." Cilla finished for him.

Hardwick scowled, not following either of them.

He resented the look they exchanged, almost as if they were

long, lost friends.

"It was many years past," the Dark One was saying. He looked again at Hardwick, his gaze going deep. "More centuries than you could count, Seagrave. But I never forgot. No' in all eternity. Her loss pains me to this day."

He drew a long breath and released it slowly. "I nearly undid your curse when I appeared to your lass at Dunroamin." He gave a bitter sounding laugh. "I even felt bad for frightening her. Imagine! But once I returned to my temple I caught myself.

"Until you strode into my inner sanctum wanting to surrender your all for one night in her arms," he admitted. "When you refused my offer of her soul for the pleasure, I remembered how I'd held my own woman's cold and limp body. How I begged the gods to restore her to me. They refused. And I…"

He let the words tail off, his expression hardening.

"You were moved to give us a chance." Cilla's voice broke on the words.

She reached for Hardwick's hand, twining their fingers.

He still didn't believe. "There's more. Some catch, I can smell it. Even if you were touched by my lady's resemblance to someone you knew thousands of years ago, I'll ne'er accept that you'd release my soul so easily."

The almost imperceptible tightening of the Dark One's lips proved him right.

"Well?"

"The truth, Seagrave, is that I had no choice."

Hardwick folded his arms. "That's no answer."

The Dark One ran a hand over his hair, looking annoyed. "There are powers in the Otherworld even greater than myself and my master. You evoked them when you refused Cilla's soul to be taken in exchange for your boon."

"I broke my own curse?" Hardwick's brow lifted, his jaw dropping.

"Call it what you like." The Dark One shrugged. "Your selflessness unleashed the only power I cannae battle. The eternal strength of a pure and loving heart. When you roared *'Nae!'* at me, your love for your lady ripped open the entrance to the redemption tunnel. Much as I wished otherwise, I couldnae have stopped you from hurtling into it."

Hardwick stared at him, too stunned for words.

So it was true!

Somewhere deep inside him, something coiled tight and then sprang free, releasing the last of his doubt. His heart thundered wildly and his throat worked, the emotion clogging it all too human for him

to deny his foe's claims.

Now he knew why he'd been plagued by such weariness. The all-too-mortal maladies he'd brushed aside.

His sleepiness and hunger, his inability to sift properly.

"By the gods!" He grabbed Cilla and crushed her to him.

She flung her arms around him, holding him just as tight. "I told you it was true! He loved a woman who looked like me." She reached up, traced her fingers along Hardwick's jaw. "Do you not see? He remembers heartache, what it was like to lose her. That's why he helped us."

"Humph." Hardwick stiffened, not ready to credit the fiend with mortal feelings.

Cilla threw a glance at the bastard. "That's it, isn't it?"

"I was a man, once," he allowed, a shadow crossing his face. "That time is long past, so distant that even Scotland's oldest stones wouldn't remember. But you, my lady…"

He didn't finish, turning instead to Hardwick.

"Your journey from here, Seagrave, is your own." Looking his formidable self again, he gripped Hardwick's shoulder, squeezing hard. "Use it wisely. You know I'll be watching."

And then he was gone.

Only a stir in the wind and a faint whiff of sulfur indicating he'd been there at all.

Chapter Eighteen

"Wow." Cilla began to shake all over. "Did that really happen?"

Hardwick took her hands in his. "Something did, aye. I'm just no' sure what-"

"I am!" She was, beyond doubt. "You're whole again, the spell against you broken." The wonder of it swept her with a rush of emotion. She glanced about the rubble-filled bailey, half-expecting to see the Dark One in a shadowed corner, watching them.

Whoever he truly was, he was gone.

But he'd upturned the world in his passing. Tiny whirlwinds eddied across the courtyard's grass-and-weed-clogged expanse, twirling gusts of dried leaves and what-not settling only slowly onto the ancient, muddied ground.

The portent of his revelations hung in the air. So thick, she almost choked on the hope he'd left with them. A tight, hot-throbbing knot grew in her throat and her eyes burned.

She took several deep breaths, trying to ground herself.

"Cease your crying, sweetness." Hardwick grasped her arms and looked down at her. The distrust was back in his eyes. "There may no' be a reason to rejoice. I ken what happened, right enough. But I still dinnae trust him.

"If he's tricked us, your pain will gut me." He pulled her close and tightened his arms around her, resting his head against her hair. "For myself-"

"But it *is* true!" She blinked up at him, her heart thundering wildly. "All of it. I know it to the roots of my soul," she cried, her voice thickened by emotion. "You do, too. I see it on you. There's something different!"

And there was.

His medieval sword was gone, even the low-slung sword belt she'd found so sexy.

"Look – he took your sword!" She pulled back, victory hers when he followed her gaze, his eyes widening when he saw that his weapon had vanished.

"Odin's balls!" He scrunched his eyes, then looked again.

But rather than admit a miracle, he scowled. "That craven will stoop to any trick."

"You must believe!" She leaned into him again, willing him to have faith. "If you don't maybe the undoing of the spell won't work. It could be reversed, or the redemption tunnel might pull you back up

into it."

"I'm no' sure anything has happened to be reversed. Thon beast has a gifted tongue, capable of spelling anyone he addresses – even me in a vulnerable moment." His frown darkened and he shoved a hand through his hair. "I did believe for a beat. Now that he's gone, my doubts have returned."

He shook his head. "There's only one way to know for sure and I'll no' risk that."

"I say we do!" She knew what he meant, so she lifted up on her toes and bracketed his face. "Now, here in this place that was once your home."

"Nae." His refusal was swift.

"Yes." She kissed him hard and fierce, letting her lips plunder his before he could pull away.

She wound her arms around his neck, holding to him in case he tried. "Please..." She pressed closer, hoping her warmth and curves might sway him.

Capitulating, he turned their kiss into a hot, open-mouthed assault, all tongues and mingled breath. His sandalwood scent swirled around her, flooding her senses, exciting her. Shivers rippled through her, heating her blood.

"Precious lass." He gripped the back of her head, angling her face to kiss her more deeply.

"See." She breathed the word against his mouth. "We're kissing and nothing is happening." Breaking away, she let her tongue glide along his jaw and then swirled its tip across the bottom of his ear. "No bogeymen jumping out of the shadows, no red devils. Only us, kissing and kissing, holding each other, and" – a particularly strong tremor raced the length of her – "the delicious tingles stirring between my legs, because I want you there."

"Have done!" He swept his hands down her back, splaying his fingers across her hips. "Dinnae speak so – I cannae bear it."

"That is my hope. I-" She broke off, her eyes widening at the sudden swell beneath his kilt. Hot, heavy, and demanding, his hardness thrust against her, making her burn even through the thick wool of his plaid.

"Mercy!" Her heart galloped. Leaning in for more kisses, she rubbed against him, already melting.

"Nae, lass." He set her from him, scowling darker than she'd ever seen. "I'll no' risk it. This ends here and now."

He stepped back, breathing hard. "I forgot myself. I'll no' be endangering you-"

"Does that mean you won't trust me either?" Cilla shrugged off her jacket, tossing it onto the grassy, rubble-strewn ground. "I

thought we'd moved past that? Have you forgotten the bliss you've given me? How I've lain open before you, quivering beneath your kisses?"

She looked at him, knew her eyes were blazing. "Yes, I mean *those* kisses."

"Lass." Regret darkened his face. "Dinnae do this. You dinnae ken what can happen, the dangers."

She glared at him, on a roll. "What about those looks you gave me during my broken china class? You made me feel your fingers stroking me, even slipping beneath my panties to dip in and out of me, probing and rubbing." She paused for breath, her breasts rising with her agitation. The memory scalded her, sending hot, tingly heat to her center. "You kept on until I could hardly finish my workshop.

"No man has ever touched me that way." *Nor will I ever allow anyone else to do so!* "It wasn't just hot, titillating and orgiastic. It was beautiful, melting my heart, my soul, every bit as much as the wee bit of nerves between my thighs."

"Cilla." He shook his head, his eyes sad. "Say no more."

"You touched me." Her voice thickened, emotion roughening the words. "A thousand men can put their hands on a woman. Only one can touch her.

"Until he does," – she drew a shaky breath, dashed at her cheek – "until that moment, she is as a virgin."

"Stop now." He turned aside, shoved both hands through his hair. "You've seen the fiend's power." He whirled back to her, his face dark. "He cannae be trusted. No' with someone as precious as you."

"I believe him!" Determined to prove it, she reached for the buttons of her blouse, undoing them with a speed that stunned her. "As for trust, there are some who'd say I'm the one who's needed the most trust in this twosome!"

Her blouse landed near her jacket.

She tossed back her hair, sent her bra flying. "Well?"

"I told you, lass. Have done." He turned away, his hands clenched at his sides.

Too bad for him, doing so let her see the unmistakable rise in his kilt.

He wanted her, and badly.

She bit down on her lip, bent to tug off her shoes and socks. Straightening, she grabbed her belt buckle, undoing it so swiftly she broke a nail. Heart pounding, she ripped open her waist snap and yanked down the zipper. It took her less than a wink to rid herself of her pants and panties and kick both aside.

The moment she did, Hardwick tensed. As she looked, a great

shudder ripped through him and his fisted hands tightened visibly, his knuckles now white.

She drew a deep breath and put back her shoulders.

It was now or never.

"Turn around." Her voice brooked no refusal. "I'm naked."

"Mother of all the gods!" He whipped around, closing the distance between them in two great strides. "I'd sworn no' to do this, but I have no more restraint." He reached for her, pulling her hard against him. "Now it's too late. I cannae help myself."

He wrapped an iron-hard arm around her waist, crushing her even more. "Och, sweetness, did no one e'er tell you what a naked woman does to a Highlander? Have you any idea what *you* do to me?" Gripping her face with his free hand, he sealed his mouth over hers, claiming her lips in a rough, hungering kiss.

The devouring kind that showed no mercy.

She cried out, spreading her hands across the broad width of his plaid-draped chest. Her entire body trembled, her legs almost giving out when he broke the kiss to look down her. Holding her gaze, he reached for the large Celtic brooch at his shoulder, ripping open its clasp.

He threw it aside and whipped off his plaid, tossing it across the cold stone of the window ledge.

"Are you doing that for the reason I think?" Her gaze flitted to the plaid then back to him.

Hope leapt inside her.

Her heart raced and a blaze of tingles caught fire between her legs. Every hot, curling tongue flick he'd given her swirled across her again. Her belly fluttered, deliciously, and her knees weakened, her desire palpable. She wanted those long, slow licks now. The sweet shattering releases he gave her.

She also wanted *him*, the long, hard length of him gliding in and out of her.

"You've pushed me too far, lass." His gaze heated, sweeping over her. It was a bold, possessive, and hungry look. The sliver of doubt she'd glimpsed earlier was gone. "You know fine what I'm after. I told you" – he reached for her breasts, first palming, then squeezing and plumping them – "a Highlander once tempted, will stop at nothing to get what he wants."

He swept one hand down her side and around behind her, clutching the fullness of her buttocks. "If you didn't know, it's no' just any bare-bottomed lassie that fires our blood."

Catching her chin, he lifted her face so she couldn't look away. "'Tis the lush, shapely warmth of a well-made lass that stirs us." He leaned close to brush his lips over hers. "If she happens to be

the lass a man loves more than life itself, there's no stopping him."

Cilla's heart latched on to one word. "Are you saying you love me?"

He arched a brow. "If you have to ask, I've been doing something wrong."

"Oh, dear..." She gulped. Her lower lip quivered before she could stop it.

"I'll no' be asking you the same fool question." His hands went to his kilt belt, sending both the belt and his kilt sailing.

Nothing remained to clothe him except the silver bands on his powerful arms.

He stood back, letting her admire him. "Nae, I'll no make you declare yourself," he said, a note of pride in his voice. "I've known for long that you love me."

His declaration made, he gathered her in his arms and lowered her onto the plaid-covered window ledge. Spreading her knees, he stepped in between her thighs. He swept his arms around behind her, holding her secure.

"I have but one regret." He looked down at her, his expression clouding.

"You're still worried that the Dark One lied." She curled a hand around his neck, not liking the crease marring his brow. "I swear he was sincere. I'm sure-"

"Sweeting, I no longer care what happens, after. Leastways, no' to me." He slipped a hand beneath her, lifting her so that her slick wet heat slid against him. "All that matters is having you now. But if you'd know what bothered me, 'tis only that-"

"Just love me." Cilla gazed up at him, sure she'd never wanted a man more. She knew she'd go crazy if he didn't soon finish what he'd started.

"Now," she urged, wrapping her legs around him. "I feel as if we've waited forever."

"So we have!" Hardwick knew that better than her.

But he still made a sweeping gesture, taking in his ruined walls. "I'd have rather loved you in this chamber when it was at its finest. That's my sole regret. My greeting room, this was." He fought back the memories, the images searing him. "This was where I welcomed guests arriving by sea. Far below, where you now see only black rocks and angry, swirling waves, was once a landing platform e'er at the ready. This room awaited such visitors.

"It was filled with all the comforts of my day," he told her, the hard length of him rubbing against her as he spoke. "Furred rugs covered the floors and richly colored tapestries hung on the walls.

This window ledge was cushioned and private, protected from curious eyes by heavily embroidered hangings of-"

"You think I need such trimmings?" She reached down between them, gripping him firmly. "I'd have you take me there" - she glanced at the stony, nettled floor – "if that was the only way I could have you. Here, on your plaid in the window, seems more than fitting.

"I told you," she said, stroking him now, "it is the *touch* that matters. Not what one sees or is given, but how a heart loves. What we feel for the only soul able to complete us."

Hardwick's heart fell wide, his soul tumbling. "Lass," he bit out the word. Then he sucked in his breath as she moved over him, sliding down onto him like a burning, honey-damped sheath.

The world as he knew it split.

Seven hundred years of agony spinning away as if it'd ne'er been.

She tightened her legs around him, her eyes glittering as she locked gazes with him, the deep flush of her passion sweeping across her breasts.

"Hardwick…" She held fast to his shoulders, her grip fierce.

He smoothed a hand along her side and down across the soft skin of belly and lower to the sleek sweetness he knew so well. Need lancing him, he stroked and rubbed her, readying her before he slid his fingers up to the one spot he knew would shatter her.

His own lust raging, he circled the delicate bud with his thumb, flicking and teasing until she arched her back, her hips bucking and her pulse throbbing beneath his fingers.

Hot need wound tight around him, her wet, slippery heat almost more than he could bear.

He threw back his head, meaning to roar with the wonder of her, but bliss as he'd never believed possible stole his cry. Unending pleasure crashed over him and he swept his arms around her, seeking her lips. He plunged his tongue in and out of her sweet, silky-wet mouth using the same rhythm of the long, smooth glides of his body joining with hers.

And then she jerked her head away, the whole of her tensing as she drew a great shuddering breath and clamped her legs even tighter around him. She gave herself over to her release in a way he'd never seen a woman do, her cry of pleasure breaking at last to merge with his own.

"O-o-oh..." She went limp in his arms, her gasp a silken breath against a world set on fire.

A world – now that it was settling – he feared to see.

Not that he felt anything threatening.

But with the heat of his lust ebbing, good sense prevailed. He knew without cracking an eye, that there was a good chance he'd open them to see a gaggle of slathering, hand-rubbing hell hags waiting to claim him.

With surety, the Dark One wouldn't harm Cilla.

He'd chase the fiend to the end of all time if he dared try to hurt her.

The trouble was, now that he'd posessed her fully, he couldn't bear to let her go. As if she knew, she shifted in his arms, winding her own around his neck, her head resting on his shoulder.

Her trust almost broke him.

"That was beautiful," she breathed, making it worse.

"I'm sorry, lass." He smoothed his hands up and down her back, hoping to soothe her. "I wish things were different-"

"No need." She leaned in, kissing him. "All is perfect as is."

Doubting it, he opened his eyes.

The pitiful ruin of his onetime greeting room was still empty. The Dark One wasn't lounging against the wall in a corner, leering at them. Nor was there a root dragon or hell hag in sight. Relief swept him, almost stealing his breath. His heart started thumping, hard, fast, and triumphant.

He could scarce believe it.

Needing proof, he sprang to his feet, glancing round. Long evening shadows filled corners and stretched across rough, uneven ground that had once been smooth stone and rich, furred coverings. But nothing stirred save the night breeze pouring in through his erstwhile windows.

"It's an ordinary evening." Cilla sat up, looking at him. "A beautiful gloaming, as you Scots say."

"It cannae be." Hardwick glanced about again. His fists clenched on the truth, the joy of it dampened only by the stinging heat spoiling his vision, the hot lump in his throat.

Still, he couldn't be sure.

Heart thundering, he flicked a finger at a crumbled wall niche, trying to conjure the basin and ewer that had once stood there.

Neither appeared, the ancient niche remaining as it was now, a gash in the stone. It was a relic only, and filled with nothing more interesting than a few bits of fallen mortar and the smelly leavings of seabirds.

Hardwick's heart almost leapt from his chest.

He stared at the crumbling niche, sure he'd ne'er seen anything more beautiful.

Except, of course, his lady.

"Cilla-lass, you were right!" He plucked her off the window

ledge and caught her up in his arms, swinging her round and round until dizziness left him no choice but to release her. "I do believe the spell is broken."

He set her down, a furrow in her brow damping his triumph.

"What is it?" He slid his arms around her, drawing her close. Gently, this time. "Are you no' pleased that we have time now?"

She glanced aside, worrying her lip. "It's just that, well, I've fallen in love with you."

"Ach, but that's a cause for celebration." He brushed the backs of his fingers down her cheeks. "No' for long faces and creased brows."

"It isn't just that." She looked up at him, pink tingeing her cheeks. "I've also come to love Scotland." She glanced down, nudged a clump of grass with her toe. "Dunroamin and the residents. I can't imagine not seeing them. I'll even miss Leo and Gregor. Colonel Darling and his bluster.

"As for you..." She pressed a hand to her lips, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"You needn't say goodbye to anyone. No' now." He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her near. "I was going to let Mac and your aunt tell you, but we caught the Viking ghosties. And, you'll ne'er believe it, a great treasure with them!"

"A treasure?" She blinked. "In Uncle Mac's peat fields?"

Hardwick nodded, grinning. "Sure as I'm standing here. You can ask Robbie and Roddie on the drive back."

An ordeal he wasn't looking forward to having never ridden in an automobile.

Not that he'd let on, of course.

Feeling brave already, he remembered his gallantry and snatched his plaid off the window ledge. He whirled it around her shoulders before she took a chill.

Truth was, she looked almost feverish.

"Then Uncle Mac and Aunt Birdie's troubles are over." She clutched his plaid around her, the color in her cheeks deepening. "I'm so glad they'll be okay. With the end of summer inching nearer, that'll make it easier when the time comes for me to leave. Knowing they're-"

"Leave?" Hardwick stared at her, stunned.

Only now realizing what a dolt he'd been.

Women needed words.

'Twas the first lesson his father had taught him about the fairer sex all those many years ago. Men lived by deeds and the good steel of their swords. Lasses wanted wooing, required a man's heart laid bare before them.

His lass was plucking at his plaid, avoiding his gaze.

"Of course, I have to leave." Her words pierced him. "Americans can't just stay in Scotland. Not unless-"

"By all the living gods!" He grabbed her again, kissing her hard. "You think I'll be letting you go? Now that I've my life back to share with you?"

"But-"

He kissed her again, silencing her.

"Did I no' tell you I dinnae like that word?" He pulled back to look at her, shaking his head. "There's no place for it our future." He glanced aside, pretending to consider. "Unless you have something against me asking your uncle if we can build out the unused wing of Dunroamin? In exchange for helping round the place, of course. I can assist him with his peat businesses, and-"

"You want me to stay?" She launched herself at him, nearly knocking him to the ground. "With you, at Dunroamin?"

"No' just that." He caught his balance, then pulled her close. "I want you to be my wife."

"Oh, yes!" she cried, her smile almost blinding him.

Or maybe it was the damnable heat pricking his eyes. Either way, he knew one thing.

Life didn't get any better.

Epilogue

Up Helly Aa
Fire Festival of the North
Six months later…

"Is it everything you expected, sweetness?"

Sir Hardwin de Studley, proud and successful manager of Dunroamin Peat Enterprises, slung an arm around his wife Cilla's shoulders as they stood in the boisterous crowd swelling Lerwick's cobbled High Street.

"O-o-oh, yes." She leaned into him, toasty warm despite the icy, January wind. "You surely broke our record."

His brows arched. "Our record?" But then he threw back his head and laughed, squeezing her. "A man is always good of a morn."

"The word" – she lifted on her toes to nip his ear – "is incredible."

Looking pleased, he dropped a kiss on her brow. "You haven't seen anything yet."

Smiling, she trailed gloved fingers down the front of his plaid. "I'm tingling already."

"Next time I may no' even let you have breakfast." His dark eyes glinted wickedly. "I, after all, will have had my own."

"You're so bad!"

"Only in ways meant to please you," he vowed in his delicious Scottish voice.

"Do I please you?" She edged closer, sliding a discreet hand beneath his sporran to splay her fingers across the impressive bulge there.

She pressed and squeezed, smiling innocently.

He ran hard.

"You ask?" He pulled in a breath, releasing it in a puff of white. "For truth, if you pleased me anymore, 'tis we who'll be the night's entertainment and no' the marching guizers parading down the street."

"I'm delighted to see you so happy." Cilla removed her hand, pleased indeed.

She was happy, too.

Deliriously so.

Never would she have believed life could be so rich and full, every breathing moment a joy. Beaming up at him, she knew that happiness sparkled in her eyes. Her good fortune amazed her, and

there hadn't been a day she wasn't grateful.

There was just one little thing that niggled her.

A worry she wasn't sure how to address.

"To be sure, I'm happy, sweeting." He reached to brush her cheek with the back of his knuckles. "There isn't a single thing I want except you."

Cilla bit her lip. "What if-"

In that moment, a great cheer rose from the torchlit procession and the Viking-clad guizers thrust their arms in the air, waving their fiery, spark-spewing torches high above their heads.

A rain of ashes showered across the spectators.

Around them people laughed and ducked. Others brushed good-naturedly at their shoulders. His face ruddy with the cold, Hardwick turned to flick away several red-glowing sparks that glimmered on her sleeve.

"See, lass? There's the reason I told you no' to dress in your finest." He held up sooty, ash-stained fingers. "By the time the ceremonial galley torching is over and we arrive at the first fest hall, your clothes will be covered with burn holes-"

"I don't mind." Cilla glanced at the tiny scorch marks, the tense moment passing. She laughed when the wind sent another cascade of sparks into the crowd. "It's fun and- … oh, look!" She pointed. "Here comes Erlend Eggertson in his red devil mask."

Hardwick glanced in the direction she indicated. The large, grinning mask dipped and bobbed toward them, prominent against the hundreds of furry-vested, horn-helmed Vikings filling the street.

The blazing procession lit the sky as the merry guizer squads passed by, some shouting to family and friends waving frantically from the curb. Others raised deep voices in rousing Nordic song.

Erlend Eggertson swung his mask their way, slowing his pace as the others pressed on to the burning site, each guizer pitching a flaming torch onto the doomed longship's deck until its decorated timbers leapt to blaze.

Thunderous applause and shouts came from near the burning galley as the Guizer Jarl jumped free.

Erlend Eggertson bobbed closer.

At the harbor, flames shot heavenward, the crackle and roar almost deafening. The crowd surged forward, hastening toward the fated ship.

Then, just as Eggertson was within a few yards of them, he was caught up in the mob. His red devil mask swept away before he could reach them.

He turned back once, seeming to thrust his burning, tar-soaked brand toward one of the dark, emptied alleyways leading off the High

Street.

Live well.

His greeting hung in the air. But then, like his costume mask, was swallowed by the din.

Cilla shivered.

The Shetlander's voice hadn't sounded anything like she remembered. Before she could say so, another Shetlander rushed up to them, elbowing his way through the crowd.

"The de Studleys, right?" He drew to a panting halt, sleeved his damp brow. "I've been looking all over for you. Eggertson sent me-"

"Aye?" Hardwick slid a glance at his wife. "We just saw him go past."

The man's eyes widened. "Ach, but you couldn't have." He pulled a handkerchief from a jacket pocket and dabbed at his forehead. "That's why I'm here. To let you know he's abed and couldn't make the festivities. Food poisoning, he thinks. A shame it is, too, coming now of all nights."

Cilla frowned. "But-"

Hardwick squeezed her elbow, silencing her. "Did someone else wear his costume, then?"

The man laughed and shook his head. "Eggertson's? Not a chance. He's so proud of that devil face he wouldn't even let his sons wear the mask."

Hardwick and Cilla exchanged glances.

The Shetlander smiled. "He swears he'll be fit by tomorrow's eve. He'd like you to join him – join us - at one of the private fest halls for a party he's arranged in your honor. Our thanks for helping to get our costumes back to us."

"We'll look forward to it." Hardwick nodded.

The man touched his brow and turned, disappearing the way he'd come.

"I knew there was something funny about the way the mask bobbed over to us." Cilla grabbed Hardwick's arm. "It was him! The Dark One. He came to say goodbye and wish us well."

"Bah!" Hardwick snorted. "That one ne'er does anything so mundane. He'll have had a reason."

Cilla considered. "Well, he did-"

She broke off at the look on her husband's face.

Half turned away from her, he was staring in the direction the Dark One had pointed, a look of amazement on his handsome face.

She saw why at once.

Two Vikings stood in the darkness of a narrow alleyway. Tall, proud, and festively dressed, the woman's long blond braid identified

her at once, as did Sea-Strider's colorfully painted shield and nine foot sword.

If there'd been any doubt, the strange otherworldly glow that shimmered about them was more than telling.

Their smiles, however, were a surprise.

Almost beneficent, there was something about them that pricked the backs of Cilla's eyes. She swallowed hard, willing the hot lump in her throat to recede.

She really was too emotional lately.

"What's she carrying?"

Cilla blinked, Hardwick's words making her start.

"H'mmm?" She squinted, trying to see better through the crowd.

Not that she needed to.

The woman had left the alley and was coming toward them. The blazing light of the Up Helly Aa flames clearly showed the tiny wooden sword and the little Viking-painted shield in her hands.

"Oh my God!" Cilla stared as Gudrid approached, her smile saying everything. "She knows."

"Knows what?" Hardwick looked at her.

But then Norsewoman was there, in front of them. Silent, she handed Cilla the miniature sword and shield, nodding solemnly when she took them.

"Our thanks." Gudrid's voice was soft, melodic. "And our blessings."

On the words, she vanished.

And at the edge of the crowd, Sea-Strider no longer stood in the entrance to the alley.

What remained was a strange but jubilant welling in Hardwick's chest. It was a feeling that increased the longer he observed how tightly his wife clutched the tiny wooden sword and shield.

When she started blinking rapidly and a tear rolled down her cheek, he grabbed her and slanted his mouth over hers, kissing her fiercely.

"Odin's balls, woman!" He released her to swipe a tear off his own cheek. "Whye'er did you no' tell me?"

She looked up at him, the uncertainty in her eyes splitting him. "I was afraid you wouldn't be ready. That you'd rather things would have stayed as-"

He reached for her again, squeezing her as hard as he dared. "No' ready?" he roared the words, causing heads to swivel. "Our first child and you think I'm no' pleased?

"Sweet lass, I am overjoyed!" *I have waited seven hundred years for this privilege!*

Cilla beamed, her eyes glistening.

The swivel-heads slapped shoulders and cheered.

Hardwick ignored them.

Ne'er a man of words, he thrust his hands in her hair and kissed her. Rough, fast, and furiously, showing her beyond doubt how very happy she'd made him.

Around them the night burned brightly. And beneath his lady's heart a flame of a very different nature flickered and grew, the thought filling him with more joy than he would've believed possible.

As if she knew, Cilla tightened her arms around him, sighing.

He pulled back only long enough to flash her a grin. "By the gods, but I love you."

Then he resumed kissing her, this time slow and sweet.

Author's Footnote

Tall, Dark, and Kilted combines three of my passions: all things old and quirky, wild places, and the paranormal. The way to my heart is to drop me off in a vast and empty corner of Scotland – somewhere untouched by time, where rocks, wind, and cold, are your only companions. Toss in a ghost or two, an atmospheric castle ruin or a seen-better-days stately home, and I'm happy.

This book's setting is Scotland's rugged and remote far north. Sutherland, to be precise. Although I love every inch of Scotland, it is here that my heart beats hardest. All the places visited by Cilla and Hardwick are real, though I changed a few names. These locations are on the map and I highly recommend exploring them if ever you journey to Sutherland.

Dunroamin is entirely fictitious, but it could well be one of the phenomenally atmospheric privately-owned castles I've visited in Scotland. Actually, Uncle Mac and Aunt Birdie's home is based on several of them. Places that, like Dunroamin, are filled with the old things I love so much: antiques, medieval weaponry, bolt-upon-bolt of faded tartan, and other bits of assorted whimsy. In such places, the past is cherished and the intrusion of anything modern is blessedly kept to a minimum.

Castle Varrich is real and exactly as described in the story. The trek up to the ruin is also accurately depicted – I know from experience, though I have never encountered a sexy Highland ghost within the ruin's walls.

The ruin one can visit today was built in the 14th century by Clan Mackay. As it is believed to stand atop an even older structure, a Norse stronghold, Gudrid the Viking ghost (and her lover) could well have had ties to Castle Varrich.

Hardwick's home on Scotland's northeastern coast is also real. But I changed the name to Seagrave. The real ruin is Slains Castle, and it is eerily spectacular. It is quite derelict (as described in this book) and also dangerous because it really does perch on the edge of some truly precipitous cliffs. Memorial markers scattered here and there at the ruin honor the poor souls who have plunged to their death at Slains. So if you visit, tread carefully.

Slains was supposedly Bram Stoker's inspiration for Dracula. So you can imagine the ambiance. Every time I've visited, I was fortunate to be there on my own, which enhanced the atmosphere. Sadly, such explorations are a thing of the past as the castle fell into the hands of developers in recent years. The plan is to restore the ruin and turn it into residential flats. So the site is now roped off and entry is no longer allowed.

Cilla's interest in broken china jewelry is my own and I share her views about 'damaged' porcelain. Regrettably, I have not attempted to make my own such pieces. If ever deadlines allow, I would embrace doing so as a new and well-loved hobby.

Gregor, the mischievous great skua – a pterodactyl-like creature aka a 'bonxie' – was based on my own encounters with these dive-bombing beasties in northern Scotland and Shetland. The birds nest on coastal high moors and are quite ferocious. They attack anyone approaching their nests (which you can't see for high grass, heather, or rocks). Clearly, it is their good right to be so fierce, and signs warning of them are posted when they're about. They've been known to take off noses, so caution is wise.

Shetland's Up Helly Aa is a Viking fire festival that culminates with a torch-lit parade of costumed 'guizers' and the burning of a Viking ship. It's an annual event, taking place every year on the last Tuesday in January. If ever you go, wear an old coat because, as in the story, sparks and ash really do whirl through the air, burning holes in spectators' clothing.
In summer months, interested Shetland visitors can learn more at the Galley Shed's Up Helly Aa Exhibition. Opening times are limited, only three days a week, so plan ahead. If you visit, tell Erlend Eggertsson hello. No, he doesn't really exist – I made him up. But you can be sure that the real folk who run the Galley Shed and Shetland's Up Helly Aa festival, are just as dedicated.

Thank you for reading Tall, Dark, and Kilted. If you love wild places and old things as much as I do, I hope you enjoyed visiting Hardwick and Cilla in Scotland's rugged far north.

Wishing you Highland Magic!
Allie Mackay / Sue-Ellen Welfonder

If you enjoyed Tall, Dark, and Kilted, you might enjoy the other books in the Ravenscraig Legacy series…

Highlander in Her Bed
Ravenscraig Legacy, Book One

All-business American Mara McDougall thinks there are no such things as ghosts. But a trip to Scotland and one gorgeous phantom are about to prove her dead wrong.

A self-employed tour guide, Mara is weary from leading her charges all over London. So she takes a breather in an antique shop, and spots perhaps the handsomest bed ever. Then she bumps into the handsomest man ever. He has a sexy Scottish burr, a heated gaze, and a chip on his brawny shoulder. Despite a bad start, Mara can't deny her attraction to the irresistible Highlander. Then she discovers she's inherited a Scottish castle, and the stipulations she must meet in order to claim her unexpected windfall will help her banish the hot Scot from her mind, or so she hopes.

As a ghost, Sir Alexander Douglas has reviled the name MacDougall for ages. Once a medieval knight betrothed to a lass he'd yet to meet, he fell victim to her beau, a MacDougall, who tricked him into a curse that he would forever haunt the bed intended for his would-be bride. Now Alexander will stop at nothing to keep the magnificent four-poster out of MacDougall – or *Mc*Dougall – hands. But when Mara buys the bed for her castle, he reckons she's nothing like his enemy. After all, no other MacDougall ever made him burn with passion and long for the one thing he never knew he missed: love.

Highlander in Her Dreams
Ravenscraig Legacy, Book Two

As a paranormal investigator, Kira Bedwell knew that her gift as a far-seer had its advantages. But while touring the ruins of a Scottish castle, she never expected to gaze upon the fierce medieval clan chieftain Aidan MacDonald…

She certainly never thought the irresistible Scot would appear in her dreams from then on.

Years later, while investigating time portals in Scotland, Kira again sees Aidan. When she unknowingly steps through a magical gateway, she finds herself face-to-face with the handsome Highlander – back in the fourteenth century!

Aidan is surprised – and glad – to finally hold the woman he has desired for so long. But even as their romance transcends dreams to become reality, danger threatens as they come under attack by Aidan's enemies. It will take all of their courage and strength for their love to survive beyond time itself…

Some Like It Kilted
Ravenscraig Legacy, Book Four

Mindy Menlove lives in a castle that was transported stone by stone from Scotland to Pennsylvania. When her fiancé dies in scandal and Mindy decides to sell the gloomy estate, her plans soon unravel. She's bound for the Hebrides, a place she'd hoped to avoid. And rather than escaping the past, she's confronted by the castle's original builder, who happens to be maddeningly irresistible and seven years young.

Bran of Barra was a legendary Highland chieftain. Since his demise he has enjoyed his ghostly pleasures – until a feisty female from across the Atlantic claims that she's demolished and not intends to restore his ancestral home. It's a task she hasn't accepted willingly, and if the roguish Bran doesn't change Mindy's mind about his bonnie homeland – and *him* – neither of them will ever find any peace. But unexpected passion can be the most powerful…

For more Scottish paranormal goodness, you might enjoy the first book in my Highland Ghostbuster series…

Haunted Warrior

When spirits rise, love soon follows…

Kendra Chase earns her living as a ghost whisperer. Cajoling disgruntled discarnates isn't easy, so she's been looking forward to a break in Edinburgh. But before she can even tour the castle or try haggis, an unexpected assignment sends her to Scotland's rugged north coast. The tiny fishing village of Pennard is being excavated for a historical restoration project, and the living locals aren't the only ones upset by the plans: Supernatural protests have been reported.

No one knows better than Graeme MacGrath that his seaside village is more than North Sea nostalgia, peat smoke, and plaid. Bound by a centuries-old legacy to keep the region's peace, MacGrath is the fiercest opponent to the development project. The renovation work has disrupted the protective veil that shields this world from the ancient, half-mythic past. And though he doesn't have time for dallying with fetching American tourists, when Kendra arrives, desire flares between them. They soon join forces to save Pennard, but can they stop themselves from the one thing they can't risk – falling in love?

About the Author

"Mackay is a master at penning magical tales of love across the ages."
~ Fresh Fiction

Allie Mackay is the pen name for USA Today bestselling author Sue-Ellen Welfonder who writes Scottish medieval romance under her real name. A former flight attendant, she has three grand passions: Scotland, the paranormal, and animals. All can be found in her medieval romances and the paranormals she writes as Allie Mackay.

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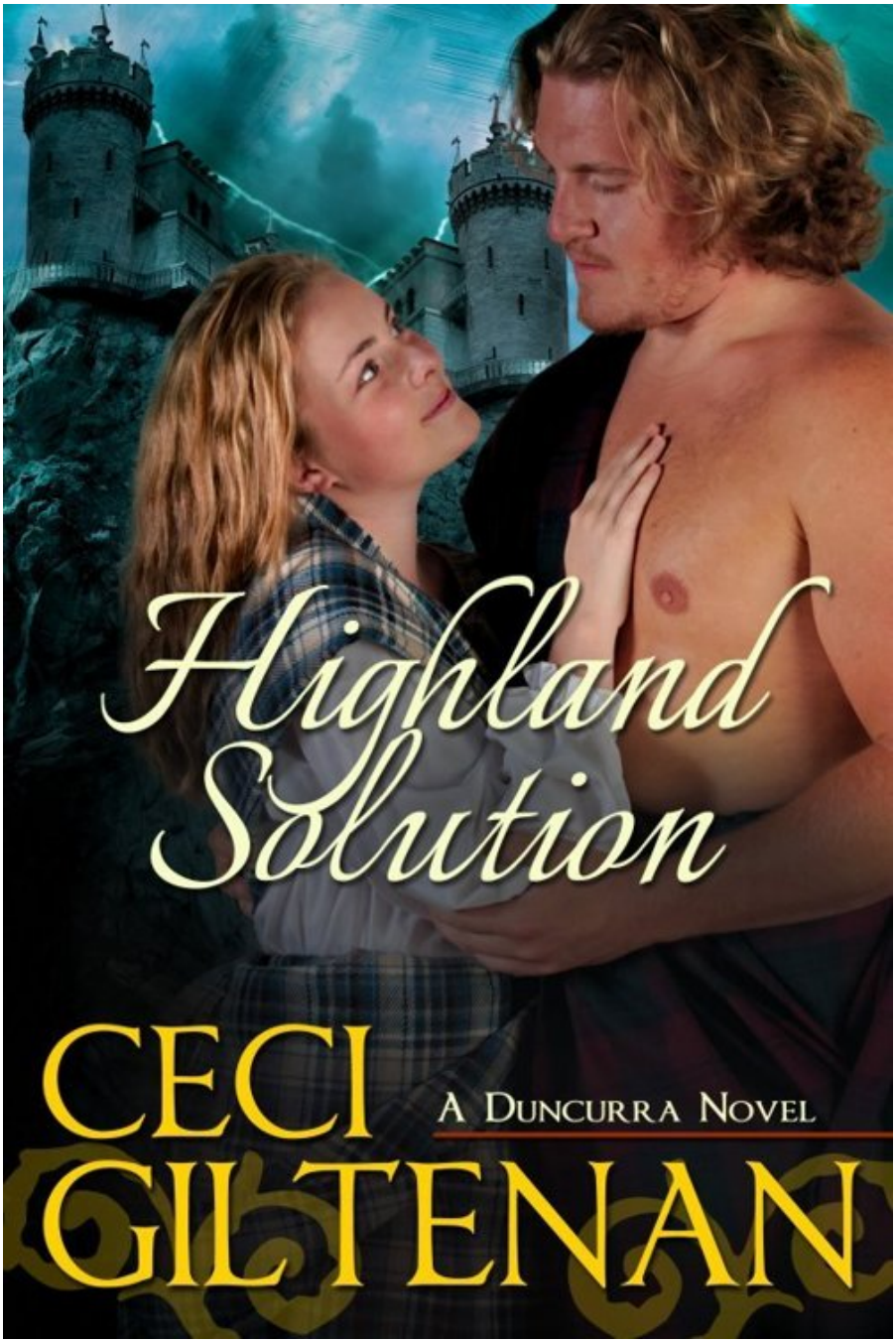
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Highland Solution
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Duncurra Book 1

Ceci Giltenan



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Highland Revenge, a novella

Dedications

To my beloved husband and children, thank you for your love and support.

To the incomparable Kathryn Lynn Davis, thank you for jumping in and helping me reedit this me at a moment's notice. I am looking forward to great collaborations in the future.

To my dear friends and sisters in heart, Lily Baldwin, Kathryn Lynn Davis, Kate Robbins, Tarah Scott, Suzan Tisdale and Sue-Ellen Welfonder—I will never be able to thank you enough for your kindness and support over this rocky road. I feel incredibly blessed to have you and your combined magic in my life.

Chapter 1

Cotharach Castle, Central Scottish Lowlands, June 1359

"Lady Katherine, oh! Lady Katherine, there you are," said an ashen-faced chambermaid as she rushed into the kitchen. "You must come quick. There are two Highlanders in the great hall with your uncle. Sir Ruthven bid me fetch you there now."

Hot, flushed, and certainly not prepared to receive visitors or face her uncle again so soon, Katherine sighed. "You stay here. I'll go to the great hall alone. It never pays to keep Uncle Ambrose waiting." At the look of panic on the girl's face, Katherine added, "I'm sure it's nothing. Don't worry."

Katherine froze when she saw at least a dozen rather imposing Highland warriors waiting in the courtyard. An even larger group of Ruthven soldiers kept their distance, observing the strangers cautiously. Knowing she'd pay for it later, she stepped back into the kitchen and asked Moyna to offer them food and ale. Then, fearing she had already kept her uncle waiting too long, she hurried into the great hall.

She entered with her head down. Sometimes a show of subservience tempered his anger. He read from an unfurled scroll and didn't acknowledge her immediately so, with her eyes still downcast, she took a quick look to her right.

Two sets of feet in the open leather shoes Highlanders wore caught her attention. Unbidden, her eyes followed the nearest thickly muscled bare legs up the length of the man's tall, powerfully built body. He wore typical Highland clothing, a belted linen tunic that barely reached his knees, with a plaid fastened by a brooch around his massive shoulders. She had to tilt her head back to see his face. The grim expression he wore startled her. Clearly this man was not happy, and she suspected Uncle Ambrose had something to do with it.

Katherine realized eventually that her uncle didn't intend to acknowledge her. Unable to stand the tension any longer, she said, "Uncle Ambrose, you sent for me?" Chancing another quick glance at the Highlander, she saw his grim expression replaced first by confusion, followed very quickly by anger.

When she turned her attention back to her uncle, his barely concealed glee worried her. Finally he replied, "Yes, Katherine, my darling, we have received a missive from the king and it concerns you."

This is definitely not good. She carefully kept her emotions masked. "Me?" she asked calmly.

"Yes, my sweet. This is Niall MacIan, Laird of Clan MacIan." He

gestured to the angry warrior she had eyed. “And the commander of his guard, Diarmad. Our king has requested that you become Laird MacIan’s wife.”

Katherine took a breath and, with supreme will, continued to appear calm and emotionless.

“Requested that I become his wife?” she asked slowly.

“Of course it is a request.”

“I can decline this request?

“Certainly you can, Katherine. However, His Majesty says if you choose to decline, it is in your best interest, and the best interests of Clan Ruthven, for me to be named Lord Ruthven and for you to enter the religious life.”

“And what happens to Cotharach and my people if I accept the proposal?” she asked, a note of panic creeping into her voice.

A look of smug satisfaction crossed her uncle’s face, and he spoke to her as if she were a very dull child.

“Oh, my dear, I have bungled this badly. I will start over and try to help you understand. His Majesty feels it is in the best interests of Clan Ruthven for me to assume control as Lord Ruthven and rule Cotharach. He is giving you two options. The one His Majesty prefers is for you to marry Laird MacIan and go with him to his home in the Highlands. As your husband, Laird MacIan will renounce his claim to your title and lands. In return, he will receive an exceedingly generous dowry. However, if this is not acceptable, you may choose to enter the religious life. The good sisters will receive a modest dowry, but His Majesty has determined that Laird MacIan will still receive the bulk of your dowry, because of his willingness to aid his king in this matter. Does that make it clear, my dear?”

Katherine trembled, feeling as if she had descended into swirling chaos. Trying not to reveal her inner turmoil, which would only add to his pleasure, she bowed her head and whispered, “Aye, Uncle. I understand.”

After a moment, she looked directly into the eyes of each of the three men staring at her. In Uncle Ambrose’s expression she read joy, in Diarmad’s pity, and in Laird MacIan’s iron determination. She wanted to run—she needed to think.

Her uncle prodded, “Well, my dearest Katherine, which will it be?”

“You want a decision now? Am I to be given no time to consider?”

In a colder, less unctuous voice, her uncle declared, “You must choose now. You can leave for the convent within the hour or, if you choose marriage, we will summon Father James and you can be married as soon as he arrives. Laird MacIan is anxious to return to the Highlands, so he wishes to depart immediately after you plight your

troth to one another. Either way, you leave today."

Katherine knew her uncle had won, she just didn't know how he had done it. From the day her father died, Ambrose had wanted the title and lands that were to be held in reserve for her husband. How had this Highlander been convinced to marry her and relinquish all but a portion of her wealth? But the convent? She didn't relish either option. Finally she said flatly, "I will marry."

"Very well, I will send for Father James."

As Katherine turned to leave, her uncle demanded, "Where are you going?"

She glanced down at the old gown she generally wore when working and realized the absurdity of this situation. She lifted her head and stared at him. "For the next few minutes at least, Uncle, I am Lady Katherine Ruthven. This is my keep. I am going to pack my things and dress for my wedding."

She turned again to leave the great hall, and for the first time, she heard her betrothed's voice. "Lass, one bag is all ye'll be bringing."

She nodded and quietly said, "Aye, Laird," before leaving. Katherine paused at the bottom of the steps and waited for the messenger Uncle Ambrose would be sending to the priest. Stopping him before he left the keep, she asked him to deliver an additional message on his way. Then she climbed the stairs to her chambers.

~ * ~

Being already in a foul mood by the time he arrived at Cotharach Castle, Niall MacIan's temperament only worsened at the enforced wait for the Lady Katherine to appear where he stood with her unpleasant uncle. When MacIan saw a servant enter the great hall instead of Lady Katherine, he reached his breaking point. He could not believe his ears when this servant addressed Ruthven as Uncle Ambrose. The lovely lass couldn't be the one whispered about in Edinburgh Castle. Yet Sir Ruthven's response indicated that this, indeed, was she. He stared boldly at her, taking in her honey-colored hair and small, willowy frame. The faded gown she wore revealed softly curving hips and full breasts.

Niall could only watch, speechless, as her uncle toyed with her like a cat with a mouse. At first she had appeared poised and impassive, but it didn't take long for her mask to slip. He heard the panic rise in her voice, but surely she didn't expect him to believe she was only concerned for her people? If she intended to manipulate his feelings by faking compassion, she would soon realize her folly.

Still, when she captured his gaze for a moment, it shocked Niall to see the fear and confusion in the green depths of her eyes. From out of nowhere, he felt a powerful urge to take her in his arms and comfort her, but he refused to give in to that weakness. Still, while Lady

Katherine was likely the same faithless, self-absorbed creature he believed all women to be, at that moment he wanted to crush Ruthven for being an insensitive, manipulative cur.

Feeling it necessary to shake his unwelcome response towards her apparent vulnerability, and also determined to clearly establish his authority after her momentary show of spirit as she turned to leave them behind and 'dress for her wedding.' Before she disappeared, he spoke. "Lass, one bag is all ye'll be bringing." She immediately became the meek, subservient lass who had first walked into the hall. Although it was what he intended, for some reason he found it disconcerting.

~ * ~

Upon entering her chamber, Katherine found her maid, Emma, waiting. "I guess good news travels fast," she said bitterly,

"Oh, my lady, what is going to happen to ye? Those Highlanders are huge. Ye'll be killed for sure." With that dire prediction, Emma burst into tears.

Katherine put her arm around the girl's shoulders. "Don't worry so, Emma. This is what the king wants and I will do it. Everything will be fine." Dear God, she hoped with every fiber of her being that everything would be fine, but she doubted it herself.

"There isn't much time and I need your help to get ready," she said, hoping to get her distraught maid to concentrate. Even with the unusually warm day, Katherine would have given anything to slip into a warm, relaxing bath and attempt to come to terms with things, but she didn't have time. Instead, with a few buckets of cold water, she refreshed herself with a quick wash. Emma helped her dress in a fresh white linen kirtle under her best deep blue linen gown, the neck, cuffs, and sleeves of which Katherine had embroidered with delicate, pale blue forget-me-nots like those growing near the loch by which Cotharach stood. Around her waist she fastened a gold belt that dropped low on her hips and she slipped on soft leather shoes. Emma unbraided and combed her lady's hair, letting the mass of honey colored curls fall down Katherine's back.

"I always thought your wedding would be a great event," Emma said as she gathered Katherine's things to pack. "We would have two things to celebrate—not only your wedding, but being well rid of your uncle, too."

Funny, thought Katherine, at almost twenty, well past the age most noblewomen married, she had never given her wedding any thought. However, even if she had given in to such musings, she never would have imagined the one that awaited her. She smiled at her maid and said, "Well, at least we haven't had ages to worry about it," at which Emma burst into fresh tears.

When Emma's tears stopped, Katherine helped her finish the packing. "I am to only bring one bag," she said with mock sternness, making the maid giggle.

"Oh, my," Emma said, in the same mocking tone. "How will you ever decide what to pack?"

Although very wealthy, Katherine had few belongings worth taking. Uncle Ambrose had confiscated all her jewelry and anything else of real value, ostensibly to safe-guard it. He only provided her with necessities—"to protect her from the sin of vanity"—so she took very good care of the few worn, faded garments she owned. She selected two white linen kirtles and the two least shabby of her gowns: a gold one made of soft light wool and a heavier, dark green one. Although the summer days had been very warm, she knew they were traveling north to the Highlands, where even in summer the nights might be cold, so she packed a woolen mantle, too. She removed the most important items from her sewing basket, rolled them in a short length of linen, and tucked it into the bag. This left room for several shifts; some linen toweling; the leather bag containing a small supply of healing herbs and other ingredients for potions, balms, and poultices; and her one luxury, a cake of sweet smelling soap imported from Spain. Finally she packed the only belongings holding any sentimental significance to her: her mother's ivory comb and her father's jeweled dagger.

"I suppose I'm ready," she said to Emma.

"Go on, then. I'll carry your things down."

"Emma, I might not get to see you again before I leave. I may not be able to say farewell to anybody. Please tell everyone I will miss them and I will keep you all in my prayers. Take care of yourself, Emma, and stay out of my uncle's way." Before Emma had a chance to burst into tears again, Katherine gave her a quick hug and left.

~ * ~

After finalizing the business agreements relating to the marriage, Niall and Diarmad waited in the great hall with Ambrose Ruthven while Lady Katherine readied herself. Eventually Niall had to turn his back to stare into the cold hearth because he couldn't stand seeing Ruthven's barely contained joy. The greedy bastard's pleasure sickened Niall, yet he couldn't deny feeling a certain amount of disgust at himself as well. It took a very desperate man to accept this betrothal. Niall had been beyond desperate. He had no funds to pay even the interest on the crushing debt Clan MacIan held. He had journeyed to Edinburgh to request financial help from the king, only to learn King David II had a significant debt of his own. He owed King Edward III of England a colossal ransom—one hundred thousand marks sterling, with ten thousand marks due yearly on the nativity of

St. John the Baptist. Apparently he had no compunction about bartering royal favor for coin, and clearly Ruthven had purchased such favor, inadvertently providing the solution to Niall's problem as well.

Niall had to admit Ruthven's attempts to deter his niece's suitors were particularly effective. He remembered his stepmother's unpleasant reaction when she learned of his pending marriage.

"Niall," she had said, "I have heard about this creature you plan to wed. My poor boy, it must be humiliating to know this is the best you can do. Why I have heard, from people who know, mind you, not only is she brainless, but she is practically an ogre. They say she even has fits, and is a hunchback." When he failed to respond to Eithne's barbs, she added, "Well, hopefully your brother will find a more suitable wife. He is so good-natured and handsome, we will be able to have a proper wedding. Perhaps he will give me grandchildren of whom I can be proud."

Even the king believed he might be saving Katherine from the humiliation of remaining unattached if he ordered her to enter a convent, leaving Ambrose with everything. He had all but agreed to do so until Niall approached him for aid. Niall assumed after seven years in exile and eleven more held captive for ransom, albeit not in depravation, the king would have some qualms about forcing a young woman into a cloister. Evidently, he had no qualms about marrying her to a financially desperate Highland Laird, who would trade her title and lands for a larger dowry in coin. Why was it, for men like Ruthven, problems had a way of disappearing if the man threw enough money at them?

As the silence grew heavy, Niall turned back around. He was pleased to see the happiness originally written on Ruthven's face replaced with consternation. Perhaps he was questioning the wisdom of giving his niece away to a complete stranger.

With Niall's attention on him once again, Ruthven cleared his throat a little to break the silence, then said, "Ahem...uh, Laird MacIan, it occurs to me that you and my sweet, gentle niece will be traveling for several days to reach your home, and will likely be sleeping out of doors."

Niall arched an eyebrow and gave a slight nod, disdain etched on his features. "Yes. Well, you understand that my dear Katherine is of course innocent and might appreciate privacy." A wiser man would have taken heed of the rising fury on the Highlander's face, but Ambrose charged on. "I think it would be best if you wait until you reach your home to...consummate your marriage."

"Sir, would ye willingly marry your niece to a man without honor?" Laird MacIan said with menace.

“N—no, of course not,” Ruthven stammered.

“Then ye can be assured I do not need ye to school me in decency!” he roared.

~ * ~

When she returned to the great hall, Katherine saw her uncle sitting in his upholstered chair looking oddly uncomfortable. Both Highlanders stood silently by the hearth. Father James had arrived and even his chatter about the weather and crops didn’t lessen the tension in the room. He was the first to notice her as she slipped quietly into the large room. He stopped mid-sentence, proclaiming, “My lady, you are radiant.”

Laird MacIan looked up and practically gawked at the sight of her. Katherine had dressed like the noblewoman she was, instead of as a servant. The gown she wore clung to her, revealing her womanly curves, and her hair, released from its braid, shimmered around her shoulders like a golden brown cloud.

After registering Laird MacIan’s look of awe, she kept her eyes cast down so he couldn’t read the fear on her face, but she was sure no one could miss the way her hands trembled.

“Well, we have a wedding to perform,” Father James said, motioning to the door of the great hall “Shall we go to the chapel?”

News of the wedding had spread through Cotharach and its village like a brushfire. Now, in addition to the Highland warriors, the staff at Cotharach and many villagers gathered in the courtyard to witness Lady Ruthven’s marriage. The ceremony began outside the chapel with Father James asking the assembly if anyone knew of any reason why Laird Niall and Lady Katherine could not be married. Although no one spoke, a million reasons flew through Katherine’s mind. The priest continued, “Niall MacIan, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife? Wilt thou love her, and honor her, keep her and guard her, in health and in sickness, as a husband should a wife, and forsaking all others on account of her, keep thee only unto her, so long as you both shall live?”

She heard Niall answer, “I will,” his voice deep and melodic.

Katherine felt strangely detached as she heard the priest ask for her assent. “I will,” she answered, the reality of the situation finally sinking in. *This isn’t a nightmare, it’s really happening, and it is forever*.

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

“I do,” answered Ambrose as he stepped away.

Katherine could all but hear him thinking *and good riddance*.

The couple then made their vows of marriage. After Katherine said, “And thereto I plight thee my troth,” Father James took the ring Niall gave him, blessed it, and returned it to Niall, who placed it on the third finger of Katherine’s left hand. She had always heard a vein

ran directly from this finger to the heart and for this reason a wedding band was worn there as a symbol of love. It seemed slightly ridiculous to Katherine, given she had only just met the man who placed it there.

Father blessed the couple and led them into the chapel, followed by Diarmad and Ambrose. The bride and groom knelt before the altar while the priest prayed again. Kneeling beside her new husband, Katherine felt very small; the top of her head didn't reach his shoulder.

There would not be a nuptial Mass, so after the prayers, Father James gave them a final blessing. When he had finished, he beamed warmly and said, "You may kiss the bride." Niall tipped her chin up and kissed her. She had expected he would give her only a chaste peck, but once he started, she was amazed by how warm and soft his lips felt and that he held her there, deepening the kiss for a moment before pulling away. Stunned, she raised her hands to touch her lips. They tingled where his had touched her, and she hadn't wanted him to stop.

He looked momentarily stunned as well, but rapidly recovered. "Say your goodbyes quickly," he told her. "We are leaving."

Her uncle approached and kissed Katherine on both cheeks. "Goodbye, my dear. I can't tell you how much we will miss you." He spoke blandly with an insipid expression on his face.

That is because you won't miss me. She didn't know why he bothered with the farce, because Laird MacIan had already left the chapel. She managed to say, "Goodbye, Uncle," civilly.

Lord Ruthven returned to the keep, not bothering to see them off. Father James gave her a hug and Katherine couldn't suppress a wince.

Father looked concerned and asked, "Katherine, dear, will you be all right? Perhaps you should tell your new husband about your back. You have a long journey ahead."

"No Father. Please don't say anything. Nothing good can come from telling him that now. I'll be fine."

He shook his head but didn't argue, and taking her arm, walked with her into the courtyard, saying, "Katherine, I'm certain you will be a wonderful wife and mother."

She loved the old priest, so she smiled and teased, "How do you know I'll be a wonderful wife; you've never been married."

He chuckled and took both her hands in his. "My sweet girl, this world is full of people whose first concern is usually their own needs or desires. You're one of the few who always considers the needs of others before your own. You have learned the surest way to open yourself to hurt is to love, and yet you love anyway. How could one so full of love and compassion not be a wonderful wife and mother?" He smiled, traced a cross on her forehead with his thumb, and kissed her

on the cheek, saying, “Go with God, my dear one.”

Katherine squeezed his hands and smiled at him, blinking back tears. It could be the last time she would ever see this gentle man. She couldn’t speak. She took a deep breath to muster her courage, and walked toward the gray mare the stable master led. Before she reached them, Laird MacIan waved the stable master away. “Lady Katherine will ride with me.”

~ * ~

Her vehement and panic-stricken, “Nay!” surprised Niall.

She hurried towards him. “I can ride very well, my lord. Stormy is mine. My father gave her to me years ago.”

Perhaps for the first time since he’d met her, she wasn’t trying to hide the emotion she felt. While he expected to see defiance, fitting his expectations of a pampered noblewoman, instead he saw fear. On the verge of barking at her for publically challenging him, when he caught that glimpse of raw fear he hesitated.

“I’m sure ye do ride well, for a woman, but the journey will be hard, over very rough terrain. Your mare is not sturdy enough. It would be cruel.”

She laid a hand on his arm, stopping him before he turned away. Looking him in the eye, she leaned close, saying in a voice so low only he could hear it, “It will be cruel to leave her.”

Unable to ignore the beseeching look she gave him, after a moment he said, “We will take her without a rider.” The sudden warmth he felt when he saw the tension leave her body and heard her sigh of relief, surprised him. He helped her into the saddle of his huge warhorse. She put her right knee over the pommel and he mounted behind her, pulling her close. He inhaled her sweet, clean scent and her soft, round bottom pressed intimately against his groin, fanning the warmth he’d felt before into full flame. He frowned as Katherine stiffened and leaned forward ever so slightly, holding herself away from him.

Having removed Stormy’s saddle, the stable master handed the reins to one of Niall’s men and they set out. After they cleared the castle gate, Katherine said quietly, “Thank you for bringing my mare, but you don’t plan to take her the whole way, do you.”

She hadn’t asked it as a question; she simply made the statement. Her accurate assessment of the situation surprised him. In fact, this day and his new wife seemed to be full of surprises. “Nay, I don’t,” he agreed. “Our pace and the terrain really will be too hard on her. I assume there is some reason why ye were afraid to leave her behind?”

“Aye. My uncle is…cruel.”

The brief pause in her comment made Niall wonder what other description of her uncle she had censored before arriving at “cruel.”

“Tomorrow we will be passing through a holding belonging to one of my allies. The mare will be well-treated there.”

Katherine gave a slight nod of her head. Then her brow furrowed and she appeared worried about something else. Looking as if she was about to confess some mortal sin, she said, “My lord—”

“I am your husband now, call me Niall.”

“Niall,” she said and took a breath as if steeling herself before launching into her confession. “I have done something, and I hope you won’t be angry, but I really saw no other option.” She felt his body become tense, but she went on. “When you arrived, did you see Tomas, the young stable boy?”

“I remember a small lad,” he said cautiously.

“Tomas’ parents are dead. He lived with his grandfather, our former stable master, but that kind, old man passed away a few months ago. Tomas continued to work in the stables, under my uncle’s new stable master, but he is as bad as my uncle. So you see, I was worried about Tomas. Without me, there really is no one in any position to protect him.” She paused, biting her lower lip.

“Are ye coming to the part where ye are going to tell me what ye did?” Niall asked, not attempting to cover the frustration he felt.

Katherine cringed a little at his tone. “Aye. Well, when my uncle summoned Father James to marry us, I sent a message to Tomas, telling him to follow the northwest road from the village until he reached the tree line and to wait there for us—so we could bring him with us.”

“Bring him with us?” Niall said, completely dumbfounded by her audacity. “Bring him with us?” he repeated incredulously, “Are ye asking me to steal another man’s serf?”

“Tomas isn’t a serf. His father and grandfather were hired freemen,” she assured him hurriedly.

“And why do ye think he will fare better with me as his laird?”

She leaned a little, turned, and tilted her head up so she could look him in the eyes. “My Lord—” She paused at his stern expression and corrected herself. “Niall. If I didn’t think life with you would be a vast improvement over that with my uncle, I would not have agreed to marry you.” At his look of doubt, she added, “I know King David ordered this marriage, but I would have joined the nuns at St. Oda’s before consenting to marry a man like Ambrose Ruthven.”

Although surprised by the intensity of her statement, he knew it didn’t take much to be a better man than Ruthven. Still, he took some bit of pleasure in hearing his new wife say it.

“Diarmad,” he called to his commander, riding in the lead.

“Aye, Laird?”

“There will be a lad waiting for us as we reach the tree line.”

“Aye, Laird. I’ve already seen a lad ducking in and out from behind the trees. He looks to be the stable-boy from Cotharach.”

“He’ll be going with us.”

“Aye, Laird.” Diarmad quietly chuckled.

Niall glanced at Katherine. Almost undone by the brilliant smile she gave him, he could do nothing but stare. She blushed, dropped her head, and turned away from his gaze to face front, but that brush with delight unsettled him. He did not need a wife, he reminded himself. He believed a wife could only be a distracting nuisance. He certainly did not need a wife whose smile made him forget everything except thinking of ways to make her smile again. He had learned the hard way that a soft body and pretty face can blind a man to treachery.

When they reached Tomas, another of Niall’s guard, a young man, whom she had heard addressed as “Fingal,” called to him and pulled the lad up onto his saddle.

It didn’t take Tomas long to begin asking Fingal a never-ending stream of questions.

Chapter 2

Katherine could hear Tomas' chattering, but couldn't concentrate on his words. Niall hadn't exaggerated—they were traveling at a brutal pace. Katherine's back became extremely painful as the day wore on. She couldn't stand the friction created by resting against her new husband's rock hard chest, yet holding her body forward made her muscles ache unbearably.

She wondered if Niall noticed the white-knuckled grip she had on the edge of the saddle, or if she appeared as stiff and uncomfortable as she felt. She had told him earlier that she could ride "very well," but he was probably questioning the truth of that now.

Stopping once, only briefly, to water the horses, they travelled for hours. Finally, shortly before sunset, they stopped for the night in a clearing near a small loch. Niall lifted her off the horse and looked at her, apparently startled.

"Lass, ye look pale and exhausted. How can riding for a few hours drain ye so profoundly? Go rest," he said, dismissing her. Then he turned back to his horse to settle him for the night.

Katherine ignored his rude assessment of her; she was used to worse. Tired and sore, she needed to move a bit to loosen her stiff joints. She looked around and, seeing Stormy, walked over to her. Her pet whinnied and tossed her head as Katherine approached. It had clearly been a hard day for the mare, too, even without a rider. She stroked Stormy's velvet nose and leaned her head against the horse's strong neck. Her father had given her the beautiful grey and Katherine had adored Stormy immediately. After her father's death, her beloved horse became a refuge. When things became too difficult, she could escape, and, even if only briefly, forget her grief while flying across a meadow on Stormy's back.

How would she be able to bear giving her away tomorrow? Her throat felt tight while unwanted tears welled in her eyes. Forcing the tears back, she whispered, "It's for the best, my pretty girl," as if the horse had been the one about to cry. In an effort to regain control, Katherine walked a short distance into the clearing, pulled up a large handful of grass with which to rub Stormy down, and returned to the mare. She enjoyed grooming the animal and found the simple, mindless action calming. She had barely started when she heard Niall bellow, "Katherine, I said rest! Tomas, see to your lady's horse."

The abrupt order startled Katherine and she lost the last little bit of her remaining control. Tomas rushed to her and took over the task. She walked to the edge of the clearing, determined not to let anyone see her cry. She had learned years ago that tears not only gave her uncle power over her, but also delighted him. In an effort to deny him

this pleasure, she had learned how to control her emotions. Sometimes she couldn't hold the tears back altogether, but she could usually master them until she found a place to be alone. Keeping her back to the Highlanders, she took a few steps into the trees and sat down on the roots of a great oak, pulling her knees to her chest. In pain, exhausted, and with an aching heart, she buried her face on her knees and wept.

She cried out her pain and the fear until her tears were spent. Then, once again in control, she sat there in the deepening gloom with her head resting on her knees, allowing the evening breeze to cool her cheeks and dry her tears. She took stock of the day. Aye, her king had all but forced her to marry a stranger. In fact, the rather large man she had married frightened her a bit, but, as she had boldly admitted to him earlier, she believed him to be a vast improvement over her uncle. Tomorrow she would lose her beloved Stormy, but Niall had assured her the gentle grey would be well cared for. She worried about those of her father's people left under her uncle's tyrannical rule, but she had managed to keep Tomas safe, and he the most vulnerable of them all. All things considered, she told herself she had every reason to feel hopeful.

She knew she needed to rejoin the rest, but hadn't quite found the courage yet when Tomas slipped up beside her. "Are ye done crying?" he asked.

Horrorstruck, she said, "Do they all know I was crying?"

"Nay, just me, cuz I know ye."

Relieved, she nodded. "Aye. I'm done crying. You won't tell them?" she asked, smiling at him conspiratorially.

"Nay, I won't. I know ye don't like people to see when ye cry. Since ye aren't crying now though, why don't ye come back? Moyna packed supper and she put in the nut bread ye love."

Katherine laughed, "You can't fool me, Tomas. You love that nut bread almost more than I do."

Tomas grinned and took her hand as they walked back to the campsite. When Katherine noticed Niall watching her, she blushed, wondering if, in the twilight, he could see her red, swollen eyes.

~ * ~

Niall had been watching Katherine discreetly from the time they dismounted. Her pallid appearance when they stopped had him convinced she bordered on collapse, but she had defied his order to rest. He watched her walk into the edge of the forest. He could just see her sitting on the other side of a large oak, finally resting as he had ordered. He hoped her earlier obstinacy did not indicate things to come. He would not tolerate defiance.

When the men had settled their horses, they opened the package

of food sent with them from Cotharach, while Niall continued to watch her. Although she sat upright, she didn't move. Her stillness made him wonder if she had fallen asleep. He started to cross the clearing to get her when Tomas hopped up in front of him. "I'll get Lady Katherine, she loves nut bread."

Niall nodded slightly, letting the lad go. When Tomas returned with her, Niall was struck again by her beauty. The priest had called her radiant when she appeared in the great hall just before their wedding, and he had silently agreed. He found her stunning. Seeing her now, holding the lad's hand and laughing with him, took his breath away once more. He had overheard the priest's words to her earlier, and now they echoed in his mind: *My dear, I am certain you will be a wonderful wife and mother*. He frowned, chiding himself silently for being a fool. He knew very well what master manipulators women could be. Would he never learn? He only *wanted* this illusion to be true, so the sooner he drove out these romantic notions, the better.

His men spread the food Moyna had sent on a low, flat rock, appearing to fully enjoy the change from the oatcakes and dried meat they usually ate while traveling. After selecting some food for herself and Tomas, Katherine moved to sit where Niall indicated, on a plaid spread on the ground. Tomas plopped down beside her, chattering about all the exciting things he had learned from Fingal. "Fingal says he and the other men are not just ordinary soldiers."

"Nay?" she responded.

"Nay," he said firmly. "They are the laird's eeleet guard. Do ye know what eeleet means?" Without waiting for an answer, he went on, "I asked Fingal and he told me it means they are special. They are the best warriors in the clan. Ye know what else Fingal told me? The laird's castle is called Duncurra and Fingal said it is in the middle of a loch. Cotharach is by a loch, but I wonder how ye build a castle in a loch?"

Although everything in his head screamed at Niall to keep his distance from the enticing woman, he brought his food and sat on the plaid with Katherine and Tomas.

"Laird MacIan, how can a castle be built in water?" asked Tomas boldly.

"It isn't built in the water, Tomas. Duncurra is built on a crag that juts into the loch, so it has water on three sides," Niall explained. Tomas continued to chatter and ask questions until they had finished eating. It seemed for every answer the boy received, he had at least two more questions, but like Fingal had all afternoon, Niall patiently answered them all.

The lad amused Niall, and Tomas' excitement about his new home

pleased him. After they had finished eating, Fingal approached. “Excuse me, Laird. It has not escaped my notice that there might be a lad hiding under the wee mound of dirt there beside ye. I thought perhaps it would be a good idea to give it a rinse in the loch and see.”

Niall smiled. “Ah, Fingal, ye might be right, because now that ye mention it, I have never heard a mound of dirt talk as much as this one.” Katherine laughed and for the second time that day she rewarded Niall with a heart-stopping smile. Raw desire rose unbidden, and once more he forced himself to remember he did not want this marriage, no matter how bonny a smile his new wife had. “In fact,” he added, “I think I will join ye.” Niall rose and walked toward the loch, accompanied by Diarmad and two other guardsmen, Alan and Keith.

Fingal scooped a squirming Tomas up under his arm and followed. “But I don’t need a bath,” moaned Tomas.

“Trust me, ye do,” Fingal said firmly.

Katherine laughed again. “Behave, Tomas,” she admonished with mock severity. The enchanting sound of her laughter followed Niall. He could not deny he desired his lovely little wife, but his wedding night would have to wait until they reached Duncurra. Niall suspected the chilly loch water would do little to cool his desire. Suddenly, he realized he had one more excellent reason to hurry home. While he didn’t need or want a wife, having his bed warmed by this lass might prove to be an unexpected boon.

~ * ~

When they reached the loch, the other men stripped and dove in, leaving Fingal to deal with Tomas. Determined to scrub off a layer of dirt and the accompanying aroma, Fingal had to wrestle Tomas out of his tunic, much to the amusement of the other men. Finally able to pull it over Tomas’ head, he stopped, looking very serious. Even in the low light, Fingal saw old, dark bruises on Tomas’ thin frame, as well as two fresh, angry lash marks on his back. With a casual calm he didn’t feel, he asked, “Lad, who took a whip to your back?”

The other men fell silent as Tomas answered quietly, “Sir Ruthven.”

Niall clenched his jaw and Fingal recognized the furious expression.

“What happened?” Fingal asked, trying to keep his voice nonchalant.

Tomas looked down, embarrassed. “He was out until very late last night. Berty, the stable master, went to bed and made me wait in the stables until Sir Ruthven returned. Sir Ruthven was still out when the storm hit, and when he got back to Cotharach he was drenched and the horse was winded and lathered. I met him like I was supposed to and took the horse into the stable. He followed me, telling me he

wanted me to take special care of his new saddle because it was very valuable. I said I would and I took it off the horse. I—I—I thought he would want me to take care of the horse first. Honest, I did. The horse looked bad, so I started to rub him down, but Sir Ruthven screamed at me, saying I was too stupid to live, and hadn't he just told me to take care of his new saddle."

"He wanted ye to take care of the saddle before the beast?" Diarmad asked in disbelief.

"Aye, he grabbed a whip from the wall and started to beat me."

"Ye must have gotten away, ye only have two stripes on your back," Alan said.

"Nay, I didn't run. He would be sure to kill me then," Tomas said seriously, "He only hit me twice because Lady Katherine got there."

"Lady Katherine?" Niall asked, his voice deadly calm. "She stopped him from whipping ye?"

"Not exactly," said Tomas in almost a whisper. "Lady Katherine put herself between us and Sir Ruthven beat her instead."

Fingal glanced at Niall, who appeared to be barely able control himself as he got out of the water and pulled on his clothes. Waves of white hot anger practically rolled off him.

Tomas continued, "I tried to get her to move away, but she had her arms around me tight to keep the whip from hitting me. He must have hit her eight or nine times before the steward came into the stable and told Sir Ruthven his bath was ready. Sir Ruthven threw the whip down, screamed at me to tend to his saddle, and left. Lady Katherine let go of me and tried to get up, but she was shaking. Her dress was torn and her back was bleeding. The steward woke Berty, telling him to see to the horse, and I took care of Sir Ruthven's saddle like he ordered. The steward helped Lady Katherine into the keep."

Fingal asked Tomas one last question. "As we rode today, ye told me Lady Katherine was the healer at Cotharach. Who tended her wounds?"

"Lady Katherine tells her maid, Emma, what to do when she is hurt herself. She sent Emma out to the stable to put a balm on my back, too, 'cept I didn't need it as much as my lady, cuz he only hit me twice this time."

Tomas had said *this time*. Those two words spoke volumes. Not only had Ambrose Ruthven beaten Tomas before, but that Lady Katherine's maid had experience tending her injuries suggested Ruthven had very likely beaten Katherine before as well. It also explained why she had unilaterally arranged for Tomas to accompany them.

Niall strode away without speaking. Tomas looked up at Fingal and said timidly, "Is the laird mad at me?"

“Nay, Tomas.”

“Is he mad at Lady Katherine?”

“Not really. He is angry at her uncle.” Fingal thought, judging by the other men’s expressions, Niall wasn’t alone in that. Determined to give Tomas the much needed bath and, in an attempt to break the somber mood, Fingal looked at him squarely and said, “I still have to find the lad under this talking mound of dirt.” Tomas giggled and Fingal gently scooped him up again and carried him squealing with glee into the loch.

~ * ~

Katherine looked up from where she sat on the plaid and saw her husband stride angrily into camp. The men whom he had left at the camp immediately became alert, but he waved them away, telling them to go to the loch. Stopping at the edge of the plaid, he asked, “Why did ye not tell me ye were injured?”

Wary, Katherine looked away and tried to school her expression, but as his words sank in, she became angry. “Tell you? When exactly would I have told you? When you rode into my home with a small army and a missive from King David requiring my uncle to give me to you in marriage? Or perhaps when the priest was summoned so we could be wed immediately because you were anxious to leave?” At this she rose to her feet, no longer the image of perfect submission, her anger clearly rising. “Mayhap I should have mentioned it as my dear uncle gave me away. That would have made a lovely addition to the wedding ceremony, ‘Aye my lord, I will marry you because my doting uncle thinks less of me than he does his cursed saddle!’ Perhaps I should have said something as we were riding out of my home, which had just been handed over to my uncle in exchange for my hand and a bag of gold.” A sob escaped her lips as tears threatened for the second time that day.

She turned away, not wanting him to see. “Perhaps I should have said, ‘Oh, by the way, the beast who just bought my birthright from you laid my back open with a whip last night. That isn’t a problem for you, is it?’”

She choked on another sob and turned to look at him again, at his eyes black with fury. She knew she should stop, but exhaustion and pain pushed her past the point of caution. “And what if I had told you? What would you have done then? Wrought vengeance on him for doing something he had every legal right to do? I don’t think starting a war over a bit of chattel would have pleased our king, do you?” As the horrible image passed before her eyes of her new husband’s lifeless body cut down in the courtyard at Cotharach, she could no longer hold back the tears. Her anger spent, she sobbed, sank to her knees, and said with a note of desperation in her voice, “You would

have been killed."

~ * ~

Niall had seen women cry before, usually when all other forms of manipulation had failed. His stepmother's tears had stopped having any effect on him years ago. He realized then that he had never seen a woman cry genuine tears of sorrow and pain. His heart began to ache for her, for everything she had suffered, and for the first time in his adult life he felt completely helpless. He knelt beside her, taking her gently in his arms so as not to cause her further pain, and pulled her onto his lap, holding her while she cried. "Wheesht, lass," he crooned, kissing her head while rocking her gently. Eventually she stopped crying, giving in to her exhaustion. She fell asleep in his arms, but for reasons he didn't fully understand, he continued to hold her.

He thought about what had just happened. Walking away from the loch, he had nursed a hot rage. As Tomas told his story, images of Katherine throughout the day flashed through Niall's mind: her white knuckles, her tenseness in the saddle, an occasional wince, the drawn expression on her face when they had finally stopped—all things he had blamed on her weakness. He had unwittingly added to her pain throughout the day by the brutal pace he set. As he headed back to the camp to confront her, he hadn't known who angered him most: himself, her insane uncle, or Katherine, for not telling him about her injuries from the start. If she had only told him, he began to rationalize to himself…but he knew better. The signs were there and he had simply failed to heed them.

He wanted to kill Ambrose Ruthven. Only a man who was completely without honor abused women or children. Niall now understood why Ruthven suggested that they wait to consummate the marriage. *The bastard was worried about how I might react when I learned of his abuse, and wanted to make damn sure that didn't happen until I was too far away to do anything about it*.

His guilt made him angry at himself, and his sense of honor fueled his rage for Ruthven, but why had he been angry with Katherine as well? *Because she didn't give me the opportunity to murder the abhorrent bastard.* Then the last words she said before collapsing into tears penetrated his thick head. *You would have been killed*. Shaking his head slightly, he realized Katherine had been worried about him. She sought to protect him by not revealing her injuries. When he heard the priest tell her, *you are one of the few who always considers the needs of others before your own,* he hadn't believed it, couldn't believe it.

Maybe she is different, he thought. *The surest way to open yourself to hurt is to love, and yet you love anyway,* the old man had said. Niall knew risking that kind of pain took a strength he didn't have. Maybe the fragile lass, who clung to him in her sleep, did.

~ * ~

When her tears stopped, Katherine became aware he was holding her. With his arms snugly around her, she felt secure. I'm safe, she thought, as she drifted asleep.

~ * ~

After bathing Tomas, Fingal wrapped him in a plaid and washed his dirty tunic. The boy looked up at him seriously and said, "I have never heard my lady yell like that."

"That doesn't surprise me."

After a moment Tomas said "It would have made Sir Ruthven mad. Will it make the laird mad?"

Fingal knew Niall would have flattened any man who dared to speak to him that way, but he would never hurt a woman intentionally. He said, "Tomas, there is no need to worry about Lady Katherine. Our laird takes care of his own."

"Am I 'his own' now, too?" Tomas asked.

"Aye, Tomas, ye are," Fingal answered.

The boy seemed relieved. He turned onto his side, curled into a ball and went to sleep.

Chapter 3

When the men returned from the lake, Niall eased the sleeping Katherine onto the ground and wrapped the plaid around her. Rising, he told Diarmad they'd have to set an easier pace.

"I thought as much," Diarmad replied.

Niall shook his head. "The problem is, we carry a small fortune, and half of Edinburgh knows about it. I had hoped that by moving quickly, we would stay ahead of any threat, but we need a contingency plan now. I want ye to go ahead with half the men and most of the dowry. Travel as fast as ye can. We shouldn't be more than a day or so behind ye."

"Do ye want your brother to ride ahead with us?"

Niall gave him a dark look. "Nay, he'll stay with me. I'm beginning to question the wisdom of bringing him back from Laird Chisholm's. Perhaps I should have considered making Rowan MacKenzie a guardsman instead."

Diarmad laughed. "Prying one of his sons away from Cathal MacKenzie would have been a challenge. Besides, I thought ye wanted to keep your brother close."

"That may not have been the best idea. I'm not sure he can be trusted."

"All the more reason to keep him close, but I don't understand why ye think that. For what it is worth, I think ye made the right choice."

"I suppose ye are right, Diarmad, and what's done is done. Nevertheless, I don't want Fingal guarding the coin." Looking across the camp, he watched as Fingal laid a sleeping Tomas near where the other men were bedding down. "Besides, I'm not sure I want to inflict Tomas' endless chatter on anyone else for the moment."

Diarmad chuckled, "Ye aren't worried ye are punishing Fingal unfairly?"

"I'm only paying him back for years of the same treatment from him," Niall said lightly. But the fact remained that he didn't trust Fingal and had no intention of sending him ahead.

~ * ~

During the night Katherine woke once to find Niall sleeping beside her with an arm thrown over her protectively. It felt so very good. When she woke the next day alone, she missed him. She stretched, groaning a bit at her soreness, and rose, glancing around the camp for him. He stood with his back to her, talking with a few of his men, and she got her first real chance to stare appreciatively at her very attractive husband.

She took in his lean, powerful build and blushed slightly as she

remembered how good those strong arms felt wrapped around her. She bent to gather up the plaid on which she had been sleeping and shook it out. Yesterday she had agreed to marry him because she didn't want to become a nun. That was a good decision, she thought wickedly, and blushed again as she folded the plaid.

Niall walked towards her almost cautiously. Taking the folded plaid from her, he asked, "How are ye feeling this morning?"

"I am well, thank you," she said, blushing furiously. Suddenly she felt very shy after last night's outburst and her bold thoughts moments ago. Looking around, she realized many of the men and horses were gone. "Where are the rest of your men?"

"I sent half of them ahead with the bulk of your dowry. I suspect ye have never been to the royal court, but ye can imagine very little remains secret there. The news of our betrothal became widely known, as did the size of your dowry. Having a large portion of it with us makes us a target for thieves. I wanted to travel fast, to stay well ahead of trouble."

"And you are slowing down because of me?" she asked, feeling a little ashamed.

At the worried look on her face, he said, "We are only slowing down a little. I have to think of our safety as well as the dowry, but it also makes sense to divide it and transport it separately." She nodded and he added, "Still, we need to move as fast as is reasonable, so will ye be ready to go soon?"

"I only need a few minutes to wash up."

"Gather what ye need and we will go to the loch."

"You don't need to go with me, I—I really won't be long," she stammered.

"I would not let ye go alone, unprotected, but I have another reason as well. I need to see the extent of your injuries," he said seriously.

"Really, Niall, it isn't that bad and—"

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. "Don't argue with me about this. I need to know. I don't want to cause ye any additional pain, and I can't avoid hurting ye if I don't know what your injuries are."

Katherine nodded. His stern demeanor brooked no further argument, so opening her bag, she removed what she needed and they went to the loch. She laid a towel and a jar of balm on a large rock and took the rest to the water's edge. Niall sat on the rock and waited for her as she washed up, then combed and braided her hair. She still wore her wedding clothes and, although a bit wrinkled and dusty, they would do. She brushed herself off and smoothed out the wrinkles as best she could. When she turned around, the intensity of his gaze

took her breath away. His eyes were the same deep blue as the summer sky.

~ * ~

Niall enjoyed watching her and realized again how much he desired her. He wondered what those small hands would feel like caressing him. As she combed her wild curls, he longed to run his fingers through them and felt more than a little disappointment when she captured them in a braid. He imagined what she would look like naked, with her beautiful hair cascading around her, and became so aroused he had to force those musings away and think of something else.

When she had completed her ablutions, she joined him and said brightly, “Are you ready to go?”

He leveled a stare at her. “Ah, my little wife, ye will find my memory is not that fleeting.” He motioned for her to turn around.

Sighing, she turned her back to him and undid the laces on the side of her gown, pulling her arms out and allowing it to bunch at her waist. Then she reached behind her neck and untied the ribbons at the back of her kirtle. Again she pulled her arms out of the garment but held it to her chest, blushing profusely.

Niall opened the back of her kirtle a little wider, enjoying a glimpse of her creamy white shoulders. He untied the linen strips holding the bandage in place, lifted it away, and cursed. Dark bruises and open lash marks crisscrossed her slender back. As he suspected, older scars marred her pale skin as well: evidence Ruthven had beaten her many times before. The new wounds looked angry but clean. Hopefully a fever would not set in. Taking up the jar of balm, he applied it to her lacerations, causing her to wince. He paused. “Does this sting?”

“Just a little when it first goes on, but it really does make them heal better.”

It tore at his heart to know she had firsthand knowledge of this. He finished applying the balm as gently as he could, placed the clean towel on her back, and retied the linen strips.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. She slipped her arms back into her garments and made to step away.

He put his hand on her shoulder, holding her where she stood. He refastened her laces before turning her to him. He had a powerful urge to taste her sweet lips again and, lifting her chin, kissed her gently. Surprised but pleased by her response, he kissed her more deeply as she leaned into him.

With a pang of regret, he forced himself to break the kiss, knowing if he didn’t, they would never leave. Pulling away slightly, but leaving his hand on her chin, he said firmly but gently, “Don’t

ever hide anything from me again. Promise me." She didn't answer for a moment. "Promise me," he said again, more gruffly this time.

"I won't hide anything from you," she said. "I promise."

It only took a few more minutes to be prepared to leave. Niall insisted she eat something before they go while his men readied the horses. When Niall had his horse saddled, he motioned for Katherine to come to him, lifted her into the saddle, and mounted behind her. Niall stopped her before she turned forward, pulling her onto his lap. "If ye ride like this and put your left arm around me, twill be easier on your back and ye won't be jarred as much."

Katherine did as he suggested. Her shoulder fit snuggly under his right arm while her cheek rested on his chest with her head under his chin.

"Better?" he asked.

"Aye," she agreed.

"Ye will tell me if ye need to rest?"

"Niall, I am stronger than you think."

"That's not an answer. Can I trust ye to tell me if ye need to rest?"

"Aye. I will tell you if I need to rest."

"See that ye do."

They set out at swift pace, though still much slower than they had ridden the day before. In the middle of the day, they crossed a river before stopping to water the horses and give them a rest. While there, they finished the remainder of the food Moyna had sent. Katherine ate sitting under a tree slightly apart from the group of men. Once she finished she pulled her knees to her chest and rested her head on them. Niall came to sit beside her. "Are ye all right? I wanted to head out again in a few minutes, but if ye need to rest longer..."

"Nay, I'm fine," she said. He arched an eyebrow at her in doubt. "Really. I told you, I'm stronger than you think." she assured him.

He nodded but didn't stand up to leave. He dreaded what he had to tell her. He had no patience for tears and pleading.

"Katherine, there is something else. I told ye yesterday we would be passing near the holding of one of my allies, Laird Carr." She nodded grimly. "It will be somewhat out of our way for all of us to ride to his keep and we are already going slower than I had planned. I have asked Keith to take Stormy to Laird Carr, and join back with us this evening. He is ready to leave." Niall braced himself for the tantrum he anticipated, but it didn't come.

Katherine nodded. Standing up, she walked over to Stormy, put her arms around the horse's neck, and leaned her head against it. She didn't cry or plead, but after a few moments, she simply whispered her goodbye. Untethering Stormy, she walked the mare to where Keith stood, giving him the reins. He appeared at a loss for what to say. He

just clicked to his horse and rode away.

Tomas came to her, his brow knitted. “Where is he taking your Stormy?”

Niall remembered Tomas hadn’t been at Cotharach as they left yesterday so he didn’t understand what was happening now. He watched as she knelt down beside the boy and put an arm around him. “Stormy has to go and live somewhere else now.”

“But why?” he asked, his lip trembling.

“Tomas, have you noticed the land around us is hillier and rougher than it was at Cotharach?”

He nodded.

“As we get closer to Duncurra, it will get even more rugged. It would be very hard for Stormy because she isn’t used to it.”

“Why isn’t it hard for the other horses?” he asked, still looking as if he might cry.

“Well, look at them,” Katherine said. “They are all a lot bigger and stronger than Stormy is. Besides, this is their home. They’re used to it.”

“But ye love Stormy,” he said.

Katherine bit her lower lip, appearing to blink back her own tears. “Aye, I do,” she said finally. “I love her so much, I don’t want her to get hurt. That is why I didn’t leave her at Cotharach, and why I am giving her to someone else now who will love her.”

He put his arms around her ,whispering “Is that why ye were crying yesterday?”

“Partly,” she whispered back.

“It’s going to be all right,” he said, this time not whispering, “cuz ye know why?”

“Why?”

“Cuz Fingal says Laird MacIan takes care of his own, and you’re ‘his own.’” Leaning in and whispering again, he said with a little smile, “So am I.”

Although she hugged him and said, “I’m sure it will be all right,” Niall thought the expression on her face suggested she might not be all that confident. She looked around, seeming to realize for the first time that both Niall and Fingal had heard the exchange. Blushing, she let go of Tomas, stood up, and without making eye contact with anyone, brushed the dirt off her gown. When she finally looked up again, her mask of self-control was once more in place. She asked Niall, “Shall we go now?”

He nodded. No begging, no tears, no pouting. Once again he was impressed with her. Katherine only showed concern for the well-being of her horse and the feelings of a wee peasant lad. Puzzled, Niall lifted her onto his horse, mounted behind her, again positioning her

sideways on his lap. She put her arm around him and they rode this way in silence for the rest of the afternoon.

~ * ~

Although their pace was easier and Niall took care to protect her back from further injury, Katherine became more uncomfortable as the day progressed. She didn't want to tell him she needed to rest. She knew she was already slowing their progress, but she didn't think she could take much more. She was pulling together the courage to tell him, when he finally announced they would halt for the evening. She sighed with relief. Her backed ached incredibly and she didn't think she had ever felt so tired. She didn't argue when Niall told her to rest, but sank to the plaid he spread on the ground, watching as he and his men made camp. Tomas energetically helped where he could.

By the time the men had settled the horses for the night, Keith had rejoined them bearing gifts. "My lady," Keith said, bowing to Lady Katherine, "Laird Carr sends his sincere thanks for the fine mare. He also said although it is a very small offering, he wanted ye to have something in return." Keith handed her a soft bundle. Inside she found a silver brooch and a length of soft cream-colored wool woven with stripes of green and blue.

"This is beautiful," she said, genuinely pleased as she ran her hands over the soft fabric.

"That is called an *airisaidh*," Niall explained. "It is like the plaid men wear but it is usually made of a lighter wool. It is held on with a brooch and worn over a garment like your kirtle that we call a *léine*."

"It is very thoughtful of Laird Carr," said Katherine.

"Laird Carr has four daughters. I suspect they had a hand in this," Niall said.

"Aye, they did," said Keith, laughing. "His oldest daughter, Anna, insisted on it. Laird Carr gave Stormy to her. She was overjoyed."

Katherine knew it had been the right thing to do, but the confirmation that her beloved mare would not only be well treated, but loved, lightened her mood a great deal.

"Laird, he also sent a small gift to ye with his congratulations on your wedding," Keith added.

Niall arched an eyebrow at that. "I'll bet he did. For the last few years, every time I have seen him, Laird Carr has needled me about marriage. I have always assured him I had no intention of getting married. I am confident he found this new situation very amusing."

Katherine wondered why Niall was so set against marriage but didn't ask.

Keith produced two small casks of mead, a jug of excellent whisky, meat pies, cheese, brown bread, and small sugared buns.

After the meal, Tomas curled up beside Katherine with his head in

her lap and went to sleep, sugar from the buns still circling his mouth. Niall's men talked and joked throughout dinner, but Niall remained as quiet as he had been all day. After hearing his comments about marriage, Katherine thought to herself that she really knew nothing about this man, or any of them, really. She had managed to figure out their names over the course of the day, but other than that, the only bits of information she had had came from Tomas the previous evening. She smiled to herself when she remembered how he thought Duncurra was built in a loch.

"What amuses ye?" Niall asked.

She laughed a little. "I was thinking about how little I know of you all. I know these men are your 'eeleet' guard," she said, emphasizing both syllables of the word as Tomas had the previous evening, "and Tomas thought Duncurra was built in the middle of a loch."

Niall, too, chuckled at that memory, "To be fair, I know very little about ye, either."

"I'm sure you know most of it."

"Frankly, everything I thought I knew about you has been wrong."

Confused, she said, "I don't understand."

"Never mind, it isn't important. Tell me, how long has Ambrose Ruthven acted as your guardian?"

"Five years. He and my father were hunting. Apparently something spooked my father's horse. He was thrown and killed instantly."

"Your mother died before him?"

"Aye, she died when I was ten. The plague swept through Scotland that year." She paused for a moment. "So many people died then, entire families in some cases. At least my father and I had each other." She sighed, stroking Tomas' head. "Things changed so much after he died." She took a deep breath, looking away for a moment before saying, "So, I became an orphan, an heiress, and ward to a cruel uncle at fourteen. There isn't much more to the story."

Niall's expression grew dark at the mention of her uncle's cruelty.

Fingal broke the silence by saying, "Gentleman, our lady would like to learn a little bit about us. Shall I tell her?"

"Just don't damn us with faint praise," said Keith.

"It is much more likely he will simply damn us," Alan added.

Fingal glared mockingly at Alan, then glanced around. "Hmm, where shall I start?" he considered the other men. "With the three old men at the top, I think. Diarmad is Niall's second in command. As ye know, he left today with six other men. There are two captains under Diarmad, Cairbre, who remained behind in charge of Duncurra, and Alan here. As we have established, Alan is old," Fingal teased. Alan

did appear to be older than the others, but while lines creased his weathered face, his dark brown hair didn't have any gray in it.

Alan frowned, "Mind who ye are calling 'old,' Fingal. Any of the three of us can still best ye."

The men laughed and Fingal went on, undaunted.

"Alan is married to the lovely Effie, who is one of the clan's midwives. She is a very good midwife, probably because she has had a lot of practice."

Again, the men laughed, and for the first time all day, Niall joined in, explaining, "Alan and Effie have been blessed with eight children. I would ask him to tell ye about them, but he is a very proud father. His children are his favorite topic of conversation. If I give him an opening, he might still be talking about them as the sun rises."

More laughter erupted, but Alan replied, "I will remind ye of this someday, Laird, when ye are bending my ear about your own brood."

Katherine blushed, realizing the "brood" to which Alan referred would be hers as well.

Fingal continued, "Then we have Muir." Shorter than Niall and with a leaner build, Muir had sandy brown hair. "Muir, too, is married, but no one understands how that happened." It was Muir's turn to glare as Fingal went on. "His wife, Shona, is one of our finest weavers. They have two sons, one of whom is training with one of our allies, Fearghas Chisholm. The other is now training with Niall's men."

"How many men do you have?" Katherine asked.

"There are twenty in my elite guard, who not only guard my back, but are leaders and trainers of my other men. There are roughly one hundred more warriors who see to the clan's protection full time," Niall answered. "In addition to Cairbre, six other guardsmen remained at Duncurra.

Ruthven had more than twice that many soldiers, she thought, but if Niall's elite guard was any indicator, she doubted the Ruthven men were half as well trained.

"Next is Turcuil," said Fingal. Huge didn't begin to describe Turcuil.

Katherine suspected people believed in giants because of men like him. At least a head taller than and half again as wide as Niall, he had to be the biggest man she had ever seen. His size, coupled with his black bushy hair and beard, gave him a fearsome appearance.

Fingal's eyes twinkled with mischief as he continued to introduce the giant. "Ye mustn't tell anyone, but ye should be warned because once we get to Duncurra, ye are bound to notice," said Fingal, glancing around as if checking for eavesdroppers. "Turcuil is a changling."

Confused, Katherine cocked her head to one side.

“Oh, aye, he is,” Niall said dryly.

Deciding to play along, she asked, “What, pray tell, does he change into?”

“A lovesick swain,” answered Niall, and the men chuckled.

“Ye see,” Fingal explained, “Turcuil is rather fond of Edna, who is in charge of the staff at the keep. Edna is a widow and most of us think she has a soft spot for Turcuil, too, although it’s hard to know why.” This elicited more chuckles. “The problem is whenever Turcuil is near Edna, he forgets how to form words, so he has never actually done more than grunt at her. It is no wonder she doesn’t know of his affection.”

The other men roared with laughter.

Katherine suspected the huge man could put the fear of God into anyone, but when she glanced at him, he blushed like a maid.

“Since I am going by age, I have to tell ye about Keith and Keavy together.”

“They are the same age?” Katherine asked, glancing at the two men. Keith had pale blond hair and was shorter and slighter than the other guardsmen. He laughed a lot and looked youthful. But tall and stocky with shaggy brown hair, Keavy appeared quiet, almost sullen.

“I guess technically Keith is older by a few minutes. They are twins, though ye have probably noticed they are not identical. They are, in fact, as different as the night is from the day, but they are as close as two brothers could possibly be.”

“That they are,” said Alan. “If Keith eats too much, Keavy gets the indigestion.”

The men laughed but Fingal interjected, “Alan must have cleaned that joke up out of respect for ye, Lady Katherine. As I recall, it is normally a much bawdier comment.”

The men laughed harder.

When the laughter died, Fingal went on, “Now we come to Rab.” Fingal indicated a tall slender man with a head of shocking red hair. “Most people refer to him as ‘Rab the Red.’ I trust I don’t have to explain why; that isn’t a fire burning on his head.”

Rab grinned and ruffled his own hair. “Fingal, ye know it makes me a fierce warrior.”

“It only makes ye easy to see from a distance,” Fingal countered to the amusement of the other men. “And finally, ye have me, the more charming and handsome of the MacIan brothers.”

“Brothers?” said Katherine.

“Brothers,” answered Niall. “And the one who is going to die young if he doesn’t watch himself,” he added. Although he appeared to be teasing, Katherine thought she heard a serious undertone that surprised her.

Niall rose, offering his hand to her. “Now that ye have been properly introduced, I think it is time ye rested. We have another long day ahead of us.”

Somewhat reluctantly, Katherine kissed Tomas’ cheek and slid his head off her lap before taking Niall’s hand. Moving away from the rest of the men, she lay down with him on a plaid. He wrapped it around them and she fell asleep within the safety of his arms, thinking she could get very used to this.

Chapter 4

Their third day of travel went much the same as the first. Niall changed the dressing on Katherine's back again before they left. The lacerations still looked very angry. He knew no matter how he tried to cushion her as they rode, the constant motion was irritating them. Then, late in the afternoon, the skies grew dark and a wind whipped up, signaling a brewing summer storm. Well into the Highlands now, Niall knew they really must have shelter this evening.

If he pushed their pace once again, they might be able to reach the protection of some caves he knew of. As much as he hated to do it, he reasoned sleeping in the rain would be considerably worse on Katherine than a couple of hours of hard riding. Niall wrapped his plaid around her as the storm hit, but it didn't prevent her from getting drenched and cold before they reached the shelter of the caves. The previous evenings had not been cold, so Niall had chosen not to risk drawing unwanted attention by starting a fire. Tonight he would have welcomed the warmth of a fire, but there was nothing dry with which to build one.

Looking chilled to the bone and trembling, Katherine stepped deeper into the dark cave. When she returned, she had changed into dry garments. She still shivered slightly, holding a heavy mantle around her shoulders.

"Ye are still cold."

"Not as cold as I was. Everything is still a bit damp, but I'm a little warmer."

Niall pulled her close to him, wrapping her in his plaid, hoping that his heat would further banish the chill while they slept. He held her close throughout the night, but she slept fitfully, waking with dark circles under her eyes.

"Katherine, ye don't look well," he observed.

"I am just a bit tired and achy. I'm sure I'll feel better soon."

"Just a bit?" he asked skeptically. He hadn't known her very long, but he suspected that if she was admitting to feeling "a bit tired and achy", she actually felt much worse than that. Still, there wasn't much he could do, so he didn't push her. "Come, let me change your dressing."

Katherine turned her back to him with no argument. Niall opened her kirtle to find her back was not healing and one particularly deep lash showed signs of festering. Following her directions, he cleansed it as best he could. Her clenched teeth and fisted hands told him that it caused her pain, but there was nothing else to be done. When he finished, she looked as pale and drawn as she had the evening before.

Once again they set out with Niall cradling his wife on his lap.

The storm had blown itself out during the night. The day grew fine and warm, but by midmorning she was shivering in his arms. Closing her eyes against the bright sun, she snuggled closer to him, seeking his warmth. Her flushed face felt hot and dry to his touch. He realized that, in spite of all his efforts, fever had set in; she was desperately ill. When they stopped at midday, he tried with little success to get her to eat or at least drink something. Instead she curled up on a plaid and slept. He said to his men, "If we ride hard, we can reach Brathanead by this evening."

Alan asked, "Do ye think she can tolerate traveling any faster?"

"I think if I don't get her into the hands of a healer soon, I might lose her," Niall answered, his voice unable to hide the anxiety he felt.

Niall pushed as hard as the horses could tolerate, Katherine burning up in his arms. They reached Laird Malcolm MacLennan's keep, Brathanead, at dusk. The MacLennans had been staunch allies of the MacIans for as long as Niall could remember. He had trained under Malcolm's father and he had enormous respect for the old laird.

Malcolm and Niall's father, Alastair, had been good friends. Niall and Fingal thought of him as an uncle. Now, just as his father had, Niall considered him to be his most trusted ally.

Malcolm met them in the courtyard. A flicker of surprise crossed his face when he saw the limp, feverish lass in Niall's arms. He issued orders to see to their comfort and sent for the clan's healer. "Give her to me, lad." Malcolm reached up to lift Katherine off Niall's lap.

Niall hesitated.

"Lad, I won't break her. Ye have to get off that horse."

Hesitantly, Niall lowered her into Malcolm's waiting arms and dismounted.

"God's teeth, lad, where did ye find this waif and what in the hell happened to her?"

"She is my wife, Malcolm." At his shocked expression, Niall added, "It's a long story." He took Katherine back into his arms, and they entered the keep.

Fingal followed, carrying a sleepy Tomas.

"Who is the other urchin?" Malcolm asked lightly as he led them up the stairs into one of the towers containing bedchambers.

"A clansman," answered Fingal, without offering any further information.

Katherine mumbled feverishly. "I promised I wouldn't hide anything from you."

"Wheesht, lass."

"Niall, I'm ill."

"Aye, lass, I know, but ye will get better now," Niall answered, willing it to be true.

Then, in a more panicked voice, she asked, “Where is Tomas?”

“Tomas is fine; he’s with Fingal,” Niall assured her.

She still seemed agitated, begging, “Niall, Tomas needs you. I need you, please don’t leave me.”

“I won’t,” he said.

Katherine calmed, slipping back into the oblivion she had been lost in for hours.

Malcolm opened the door to one of the larger chambers on the second floor. Niall entered and laid her on the bed. Two maid servants helped remove her garments. When the MacLennan healer arrived, she turned Katherine on her side before removing the bandage. She sucked a breath in through her teeth and said, “Well, I have some work to do. Lairds, it will be best if ye leave so I can get to it.”

“I’ll stay,” said Niall.

The healer gave an entreating look to her laird and stared at Niall. “I know ye mean well, but there is nothing ye can do here but get in the way.”

Malcolm took the cue and said firmly, “Niall, ye need food and rest, and Agnes doesn’t need a worried husband under foot.”

“I promised her I wouldn’t leave.”

“Lad, she was delirious, and ye aren’t leaving her. She’s unconscious now and ye will be just downstairs. Agnes will call if she needs ye.”

Niall still hesitated.

Malcolm put his hand on the younger man’s shoulder, gently pushing him towards the door. “Ye need food and rest, too, lad. I must insist. Ye will make yourself ill, then what good can ye be to her? I promise ye, she is in good hands.”

Niall gave in and left the chamber, followed by his host.

Descending to the great hall, Malcolm motioned to a screened area behind which servants prepared a bath. “A meal will be served soon. I thought ye might want to have a bath in the meantime.”

Niall ran his hand through his hair distractedly, glancing back at the stairs to the tower.

“At the risk of sounding discourteous, lad, ye smell of sweat and horses. Stop worrying and bathe.”

Niall obliged, taking a quick bath before joining Malcolm and Duncan, Malcolm’s second in command, at the table. Gratefully he accepted the tankard of ale offered by a serving maid, taking a long drink of it.

“Now,” began his host, “tell me how ye, of all people, find yourself married to a lass who looks as if she has been horsewhipped.”

“Ye know the MacIans have never been wealthy. I knew my father worried incessantly about money over the last year or so, but I didn’t

know how little we had until after he died in the spring. We literally had nothing left. Even less than nothing. Eithne managed to run up a huge debt while living at court."

"Yes, your stepmother enjoys her comfort."

"Her comfort? God's teeth, Malcolm, her extravagance knows no bounds. She accrued more than half of the total debt in the last year alone. She owed something to practically everyone in Edinburgh. I had no way to cover the debt. To make matters worse, Matheson raided our western border several times just before Da died. I couldn't afford to lose a chicken, much less cattle and sheep."

"I'm sorry to hear about your financial problems, Niall, but what has the lass got to do with them?"

"I went to Edinburgh to try to negotiate with my father's creditors and to put a halt to Eithne's spending, but nothing could be done. I finally appealed to King David for help."

"He has financial woes of his own."

"So I learned. He suggested I marry an heiress. I thought he jested, but he had one in mind. He needed to find someone who would be willing to forfeit her title and lands in exchange for a larger dowry, so he could give everything but her wealth to her uncle."

"There must be plenty of men who would do that."

"One would think, but the rumors about her discouraged most men."

"What rumors?"

"They are lies not worth repeating. I suspect Ruthven started them himself."

"Ruthven? Ambrose Ruthven?" asked Malcolm.

"Aye, Ambrose Ruthven," spat Niall.

"That lass is Katherine Ruthven?" Duncan asked.

"That lass is Katherine MacIan now," said Niall.

Malcolm looked shocked, "Her hand was sought by quite a few men who desired her wealth, but the rumors—"

"All lies," Niall said irritably. "He clearly intended to avoid a betrothal, hoping to gain everything for himself. He is the bastard who beat her."

"Perhaps she is willful," suggested Malcolm.

"She did nothing to earn a beating but protect a lad who was equally innocent," Niall snapped. "Ye haven't lived at court for years. How is it ye know the rumors about her?"

Malcolm chuckled. "I haven't lived there, but I still visit occasionally. There are many would-be matchmakers who would like to see me chained to a bride, but even they discouraged me from pursuing the Lady Ruthven. Ah, what folly it is to listen to rumors."

"Ye are old enough to be her father," Niall admonished him. The

thought of Katherine married to anyone else, much less a man as old as Malcolm, turned his mood even darker.

"Don't get your hackles up, lad, I certainly wasn't the oldest man considering her hand, nor would I be the first old man to take a young, wealthy bride."

His response didn't soothe Niall's temper.

"The lad Fingal toted upstairs," Duncan asked, "is he the one she was protecting?"

Glad that he was changing the subject, Niall nodded, taking another long pull of ale from his tankard.

"Who is he to her?" Malcolm asked.

"The orphan of one of her clansmen," Niall said simply. "Katherine is fond of him. She treats him like a little brother. He seems to have attached himself to Fingal."

~ * ~

When the lairds finally left the chamber where Katherine lay, the old healer turned back to her charge. She knew she had to draw the poison out of the wounds on the lass's back. She added some salt, a large handful of shredded wych elm root, and several other herbs to a kettle of water before putting it on the fire to bring it to boil. She washed Katherine's back with a solution of soapwort while the herbs stewed. Then she poured the boiling liquid into a bowl to cool briefly. Tearing strips of linen, she dipped them into the solution. When she could handle them without burning her hands, she wrung most of the liquid out and placed the linen strips on the purulent wounds crisscrossing the lass's back.

Agnes had hoped the lady would remain unconscious while she worked, but Katherine awakened at the first touch of the hot cloth. The healer knew the solution stung, but it had to be done. Agitated and writhing, the lass cried out, but soon oblivion reclaimed her, releasing her from the agony. Once she had slipped back into her fevered sleep, Agnes concentrated on finishing cleansing her wounds. She worked as quickly as she could, replacing cool strips with hot ones until the cool strips she pulled away had no more yellow drainage on them and the wounds looked clean. She allowed Katherine's back to dry and cool before applying a soothing balm, which she covered with clean linen.

~ * ~

When Malcolm and Niall stopped at the room on the second floor, where they laid Katherine on the bed and met with the healer, Fingal passed them. He continued up the stairs to a chamber on the third floor. Initially thrilled to see Fingal, the maid who had readied his room pouted when she saw Tomas.

Fingal chuckled, the reason for her chagrin obvious to him.

“Another time, lass.” He stayed with Tomas until the lad had eaten and fallen asleep on a pallet. Knowing the exhausted boy wouldn’t awaken until morning, Fingal left the chamber and descended the stairs. As he passed Lady Katherine’s room, he heard her distressed cries. Upon reaching the great hall, Fingal became infuriated when he saw Niall sitting at the long refectory table with his hosts. “What are ye doing down here?” Fingal demanded.

Niall glared at him and asked in a low, menacing voice, “Ye dare address your laird with that tone?”

“I beg your pardon, Laird,” Fingal said mockingly. “I thought I was addressing my brother.”

“Do ye need to be reminded they are one and the same?” asked Niall, rising to his feet.

“Do ye need to be reminded that less than an hour ago, your wife begged ye not to leave her? Now she is crying out for ye, and ye are not there,” Fingal responded, without backing down.

Niall appeared stunned for a moment, but then he turned toward the tower stairs.

Malcolm clamped a hand on his shoulder. “Niall, sit down,” he commanded. “This is why Agnes wanted ye out of the room. We must allow her to do what is necessary, and ye can’t interfere. Fingal, I know ye mean well, son, but it will not help Katherine to have Niall there. She is delirious anyway and Niall will only be in the way. Let the healer finish.”

Both young men looked murderous until Malcolm roared. “Sit down. Both of ye!”

~ * ~

Agnes told Niall she had done everything she could to stop the source of the fever, but it still raged. Now they could only wait. She finally allowed him to return to his wife’s side, although she stayed to keep watch.

Niall watched Katherine’s restless sleep helplessly. She moaned, occasionally, crying out incoherently. He felt consumed by guilt. When faced with the forced marriage, he had actually welcomed the possibility that she might be weak and slow-witted. He had thought of her as a little broken doll he could put away on a shelf and ignore. He had planned to settle her in Duncurra, assign a clanswoman to tend her, and go on with his life. He only needed her money.

But he couldn’t set this bride aside, and he didn’t want to. That was reasonable, he told himself. She was clearly bright; she’d evidently managed Cotharach. She had the skills to run a household—the most basic requirement of a wife. If he had to have one, she would do as well as any other.

He also had to admit he felt a strong attraction for her. *What man*

wouldn't? He didn't think he had ever seen a more beautiful woman, and he stirred even now, remembering her passionate response to his kisses. He relished the thought of bedding her.

How had he let this happen? After Ceana, he had sworn he would never again allow a woman to have the power to hurt him. Words of her devotion for him slid easily off her tongue, even as she loved and freely gave herself to another man. Ceana had wanted to be "Lady MacIan" someday, so she had charmed and manipulated Niall into asking for her hand. He was a fool. After eight years, the bitterness of his pain and humiliation still remained.

He must not confuse desire with love. He did not love Katherine and, while he doubted he could ever love any woman, he would still remain vigilant and guard his heart. Perhaps simply having no delusions of love would be enough to ensure he wouldn't lose his heart again. Yet even now he felt a crushing pain. The thought of losing her terrified him. Surely his admiration of her skills and beauty did not justify this feeling.

This is not love, he tried to assure himself once again. *It is…appreciation*. That must explain his despair. On top of being skilled and attractive, she provided the means by which he could save his clan. Only a heartless cur would feel nothing for her. Surely this was why his heart ached at the thought of losing her.

Chapter 5

Early in the morning, just before dawn, Katherine's fever broke and she sweated profusely. Agnes dried her gently and changed the linens. Katherine finally slipped into a still, natural sleep. Telling Niall the worst was over, Agnes left with instructions to send for her if anything changed. Drained, Niall lay down on the bed beside Katherine and, giving in to his exhaustion, fell asleep.

He slept for several hours, awaking late in the morning. Lying on his side, on top of the bed linens, he put his arm around Katherine. She had turned off her stomach during the night and had curled up against him with her back to his chest. The dark bluish shadows under her eyes gave witness to the ordeal of the last few days, but her pale skin felt cool and no longer looked flushed with fever. The linen towel with which the healer had covered her back the evening before, slid off when Katherine turned to her side, leaving the lacerations on her back in view. Niall breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the open lash marks looked clean and less angry.

He had been married to her for four days and now, for the first time, he gazed on his wife's naked form. After assuring himself she would recover, he enjoyed perusing her charms at his leisure. Her thick braid hung over her shoulder, disappearing into the cleft between her breasts. Although her arms partially shielded them from view, he could see the upper curve of the creamy mounds, barely glimpsing the edge of the pale pink nipples. He found them delightfully enticing. His gaze continued down her slender body to where his hand lay on her flat stomach. The rest of her enchanting body disappeared under the sheet. Although he thoroughly enjoyed the sight, it came at a price—he grew hard, aching for release. He knew he would have to wait a little longer until she had fully recovered, but he reveled in the thought that this lovely creature belonged to him.

With a sigh, he rose and slipped from the room. He sought out Alan and instructed him to return to Duncurra with the rest of his guard, taking the remainder of the dowry. Only Fingal would remain behind. Niall thought it better not to send Tomas away from Katherine, so the lad would continue to be Fingal's responsibility until they returned to the seat of the MacIans.

Because he did not yet know whether the six other men led by Diarmad had reached Duncurra unscathed, Niall still worried about the target they posed to raiders. Cnocreidh, the large Matheson holding, bordered the western edges of MacLennan and MacIan land, and could be reached in less than half a day from both Brathanead and Duncurra. Niall believed a small contingent of MacIan warriors,

known to be traveling with a treasure, would make a tempting target to the thieving bastard. For the same reason, Niall would not risk travelling to Duncurra with Katherine unless a full contingent of guards accompanied them. He sent instructions to Diarmad to return with ten men in five days time. He wasn't sure if Katherine would be ready to travel by then, but he wanted to be prepared to leave as soon as she recovered sufficiently.

~ * ~

The healer, Agnes, came to inspect her injuries shortly before noon, accompanied by a serving maid. Chivying Niall out of the room again, she woke Katherine, who felt as weak as a kitten. They helped her wash quickly, trying not to tire her, and Agnes dressed her wounds. After helping her don fresh clothing, Agnes made her drink some broth and eat a little bread. The brief activity exhausted Katherine and she fell asleep before they left. Niall stayed with her through the afternoon and evening, and slept beside her as he had the night before.

~ * ~

The next several days proceeded in much the same way. Well out of the woods now, Katherine slept less and less and her strength returned steadily. Once convinced of this, Niall left for longer stretches during the day, but always returned in the evening to dine with her. During these evenings she finally learned a bit more about him and his clan. His mother had died in childbirth when he was six. His distraught father, wanting to ensure his small son had a mother, married Eithne Chisholm almost immediately. After Fingal was born, Eithne visited court frequently, preferring the intrigues there to life in the Highlands. Niall didn't seem comfortable discussing his stepmother, so she didn't pursue the topic further.

Tomas visited several times a day. Niall had given strict orders not to allow Tomas to tire her by staying too long, so Fingal had the job of marshaling him. On the afternoon of the fifth day, during one of Tomas' visits, Laird MacLennan tapped on the open chamber door as Tomas animatedly described the wooden sword Fingal had given him while the man himself stood quietly near the door.

Malcolm cleared his throat.

"Lady Katherine," he said, "I think it is time for us to formally meet. I am Laird Malcolm MacLennan, your host." He made a small bow. A tall, lean man who looked to be about two score and ten years old, Malcolm had jet black hair with grey temples and hazel green eyes. He wore a well-trimmed graying beard and mustache.

Katherine sat in one of the two chairs by the hearth, and Tomas, suddenly quiet, crawled into her lap. "Laird MacLennan, I am very pleased to meet you. I am so sorry to have been such a nuisance."

“My dear,” he smiled warmly, “ye are certainly not a nuisance. I considered Laird Alastair MacIan to be my closest friend, as close as a brother, really. His family is always welcome in my home. Niall and Fingal are like nephews to me. Isn’t that right, Fingal?”

“Aye, Laird, ye always make us most welcome here.”

Katherine thought she heard a coolness in Fingal’s response.

“Not still arguing with Niall, are ye?” Malcolm said, then to Katherine, “these lads.” He shook his head in mock frustration. “Have ye ever known two brothers to be so different?”

Malcolm walked farther into the room and stood near the chair in which Katherine sat. It meant she had to look up at a rather sharp angle to see him. Katherine felt momentarily wary, but Malcolm was a close friend of Niall’s and she realized she was being silly. She answered, “I really couldn’t say, Laird. I met them for the first time barely a week ago, and it seems I have slept most of that time away.”

“Of course, how could I have forgotten? Are ye feeling quite well now?”

“Aye, Laird, thank you, Agnes is a very skilled healer.”

“Ye see, Fingal, even Katherine agrees that Agnes knew what she was doing that night.”

Confused by his comment, Katherine glanced at Fingal, whose expression was inscrutable. Had Fingal argued with Niall about the healer?

Malcolm went on, “Fingal, son, ye really need to let it go. Ye see, Katherine, when ye arrived, ye had a raging fever and in your delirium, ye begged Niall to stay with ye.”

Katherine remembered and knew she had not been delirious then. Although a bit foggy, she recalled feeling terribly ill and afraid. She hadn’t wanted Niall to leave her.

“Agnes has been a healer for quite some time and knows anxious husbands can do more harm than good.”

Although she respected Agnes, Katherine silently disagreed. In her experience, patients benefited from having loved ones close. Unless someone became a problem, she did not insist they leave, but many healers held Agnes’s opinion .Clearly Laird MacLennan respected her.

“Niall very wisely stayed downstairs with me while Agnes was working. Fingal became indignant when he realized Niall had left ye and ye called out for him. But, ye see, Fingal, it was simply the delirium. Niall made the right decision in leaving Katherine in Agnes’s care to spend the evening in the hall with us.” Turning back to Katherine, he said with a laugh and a shake of his head, “Young men can have such romantic ideas. Katherine, I can tell ye are a wise, practical young woman.”

Katherine wasn’t sure why Malcolm was telling her this, but

Fingal appeared to be both angry and embarrassed. Malcolm must have been trying to smooth over whatever had happened between Niall and Fingal, but it wasn't working very well.

Tired of looking up and thinking to change the subject, she motioned to the other chair by the hearth, saying, "Laird, I am terribly sorry, I have been rude. Please, sit down."

"Oh, nay, thank ye, lass, I won't tire ye any longer. Ye have been through a terrible ordeal." He glanced at Tomas, who still sat on her lap. "I just wanted to ask, would ye feel up to joining us in the great hall for dinner this evening?"

"Aye, Laird, I am feeling much better. I would be delighted to dine in the great hall tonight," she responded.

"Well, until later then." He bowed, then looked pointedly at Fingal, inclining his head towards Tomas before leaving.

When his footsteps had retreated down the hall, Fingal said, with the humor back in his voice, "I think I have just been told to remove Tomas and allow ye to rest."

Katherine smiled. "Tomas, why don't you and Fingal go see if there are any dragons to slay with that fine sword of yours?"

Tomas scooted off her lap to leave, but before he did, he asked, "Are there really dragons in the Highlands?"

"It would seem so," answered Fingal.

Katherine smiled at his obvious reference to their host, but before they reached the door she said, "Fingal, I'm sure Agnes meant well the other night. Please don't be angry with Niall over this."

"Don't worry, my lady, it is past. Malcolm has indeed always been like an uncle to us. I'm sure he thought my argument with Niall meant more than it did."

Chapter 6

Diarmad arrived with ten guardsmen late that afternoon. Niall was relieved to learn the dowry was secure at Duncurra. However, his second-in-command reported that while they were in Edinburgh, Matheson had raided again near the southwest border of the MacIan lands and spirited away ten head of cattle. The MacIans retaliated, but returned with fewer beasts than they lost.

"God's teeth, why is Matheson doing this?" swore Niall, as Malcolm entered the great room.

"What is Matheson doing now?" he asked.

"He can't keep his hands off my stock. We have been plagued with his raids for months now, as if he needs any of our meager stock."

Malcolm answered, "Why does this surprise ye? The Mathesons have never been particular about the way they gain their wealth. Their feud with the MacIans has been long standing, has it not?"

"The MacIans and the Mathesons have never been allies," Niall said, "but the argument between our grandfathers about our borders was resolved without a full-scale feud. Neither laird liked the compromise, which resulted in little squabbles erupting from time to time over the years. However, until this last year, they were only a minor annoyance. Now he is relentless and the losses are crippling. Your land borders his; has he pilfered your stock?"

"Nay," said Malcolm. "Perhaps Laird Matheson has his eyes on expansion? Certainly one way of defeating an opponent is to critically weaken him first. Now you have sufficient funds, maybe your best option is to go on the offensive."

"That really isn't an option at the moment. A full-scale feud with Matheson would critically weaken us, regardless of our current financial state. I simply can't risk it."

"I'm sure ye know what is best for your clan. On a more pleasant note, I just had a nice visit with your lovely wife and Fingal. She appears to be recovering well from her ordeal. I thought perhaps ye would both join us in the great hall for the evening meal."

"Certainly," said Niall absently, but he wondered what the hell Fingal was doing visiting with his wife. Moments later, his brother appeared with Tomas, who wielded a wooden sword. Niall's jealously cooled when he realized Tomas had been visiting Katherine. Fingal had merely accompanied him as ordered.

~ * ~

Agnes declared Katherine sufficiently recovered to make the trip to Duncurra. Since his guard had returned, Niall planned to leave the next morning. Therefore dinner would be something of a farewell feast. After bathing in the loch, Niall returned to their chamber to

escort his wife to dinner. The effects of the cold loch water vanished instantly when he laid eyes on his lovely wife. A bath had been brought up for her and she sat drying her honey-colored silk hair by the fire. She wore a pale gold gown that hugged her figure provocatively. He hadn't paid much attention to his lovely wife's green eyes before, but now they mesmerized him. He wondered if the gold flecks had always been there, or if her eyes simply reflected the gold gown she wore. Once again, Niall remembered Father James had called her radiant; he couldn't find a better word to describe her.

~ * ~

Laird MacLennan spared nothing for the feast. His staff served an endless variety of delicacies and wine flowed freely. Malcolm could not have been a more charming host. It warmed Katherine's heart to see the love and respect Niall had for Malcolm. They were extremely close as one would expect. When a young lad is sent somewhere to train, that family becomes his. In many cases men are closer to the family who fostered them than to their own families. The bonds of love and trust forged are intended to strengthen the alliance between clans forever.

After years under her uncle's cruel control, she had forgotten what it meant to be loved as part of a family. Malcolm certainly had made her feel welcome and she realized how much she'd missed that. She wondered if Niall's clansmen would accept her as easily when she reached Duncurra.

Until that evening, she had not left their bedchamber and she enjoyed herself immensely. The evening would have been perfect except she had the impression many of the women disapproved of her. She felt this most acutely from Duncan's wife, Lana, who sat at the laird's table with them. Lana made no attempt to hide her disdain. She barely spoke to Katherine during the meal, pointedly turning away from her and not engaging in conversation. Occasionally, Katherine caught Lana staring at her with contempt. Katherine couldn't imagine what she had done, but assumed it might be because she wasn't a Highlander, so she tried to ignore it.

~ * ~

Although the feast showed signs of lasting well into the night, Niall told Malcolm he wanted to make sure Katherine rested well before they began their journey, so they retired early.

When they reached their chamber, the beautiful man she had married finally kissed her in a way he had only hinted at before. She shyly responded, opening her lips, and he deepened the kiss, exploring her mouth with his tongue. She put her arms around his neck, giving in to the wonderful sensations, returning his kiss with abandon. He stroked her back lightly and, with the pain from her injuries gone, she

shivered with delight. He cupped one breast through the fabric of her gown, rubbing the nipple lightly. Awed, she felt it harden at his touch and was surprised to realize the throaty moan of pleasure she heard was her own. As he trailed kisses down her neck, she arched her head back, giving him greater access.

"Lass," he whispered roughly, "I was going to wait," claiming her mouth again, "until we were home... Ye need to rest."

"I don't want to rest." As he continued to caress her nipple, the warmth kindled by his kiss became a liquid fire spreading through her. The feeling of his tongue exploring her mouth, together with his hand on her breast, made her knees weak. She didn't know exactly what she wanted, she only knew she wanted more. She needed more.

She felt him remove her belt before he stopped kissing her to turn her away. She had a moment of panic as she thought she might have done something wrong, but then he unlaced her gown and pulled it off her shoulders. He turned her back to face him again before continuing the tender onslaught of her mouth. He removed the rest of her clothes, letting them fall to the floor. He stopped kissing her for a moment and simply looked at her. Realizing for the first time she stood naked in front of him, she raised her hands nervously to cover herself.

He grasped her hands and held them away from her. "Nay, lass, ye are lovely. Let me look at ye." She flushed under his perusal and, although she couldn't quite look at him, she didn't cover herself when he released her hands.

Leaning down, he captured one pert nipple in his mouth, suckling on it. This new sensation fed the fire building in her core until it became almost unbearable. Returning once again to her lips, he gave his kisses more urgency and she put her hands around his neck again.

"My sweet lass, I have wanted ye from the moment I saw ye." He pulled her hair free from its braid, running his fingers gently through her tresses.

Stepping away from her, Niall quickly removed his plaid and belt, dropping them with her garments on the floor. He scooped her into his arms, carried her to the bed, and laid her gingerly upon it. He stepped back, gazing at her again for a moment, sobering slightly. "Lass, are ye sure? Ye have been so ill, and I don't want to hurt ye. We will wait if ye need time."

"Please, Niall, don't make me wait." She wasn't sure what she was asking for, but she knew she didn't want to stop.

He pulled his tunic over his head. She gasped and heard him chuckle when she saw the full length of his naked body.

Although Katherine had the general idea of how men and women coupled, she had never seen a completely naked, very much aroused man. She felt a hot blush flood her cheeks, but before she had too

much time to think about it, he lowered himself onto the bed beside her. He captured her lips again, and caressed her breasts, teasing the nipples until they were taut. “Ye are so sweet, lass,” he whispered before trailing kisses down her neck. He fondled one soft breast, taking the nipple in his mouth to suckle.

She had never felt anything like this. What was happening to her? As his caresses inflamed her, she became bolder, her hands roaming over his back and shoulders.

He slid one hand down her waist to her hip. Slipping it between her thighs, he nudged them apart, stroking them lightly. He caressed the curls at the apex of her legs, slipping one finger between the moist lips.

“Nay,” she said, stiffening as she tried to push his hand away.

“Wheest, lass,” he whispered, capturing both her hands in his free one and kissing her lips again. His finger found the sensitive nub at her core and gently circled it, eliciting a moan. Instead of pulling away she arched into his hand. He replaced his finger with his thumb, continuing the circular movement, while sliding one finger inside her. She was momentarily startled by the intimate caress, but while one tiny corner of her consciousness thought perhaps she shouldn’t allow it, she enjoyed his touch too much to stop him. Lost in sensation, she barely noticed as he nudged her legs farther apart and positioned himself between them, continuing to pleasure her with his hand.

She had never felt so powerless and yet so completely free. She pushed against him, wanting more. When she thought she would surely die if the intense sensation building at her core continued, she exploded in ecstasy. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced. She felt as if the world shimmered around her.

While she still felt dazed, before she knew quite what was happening, he penetrated her with one swift thrust. The sharp pain breached the blissful fog enveloping her. It was sobering. She squeezed her eyes shut, clenching her teeth to keep from crying out. For a moment she trembled and tried to pull away, but she felt him gently caress her face, soothing her.

“It will pass, sweetling,” he assured her, remaining perfectly motionless while still sheathed in her. Opening her eyes to look into his, she plainly saw both his concern for her as well as rigid tension.

Just as he said it would, the sharp pain subsided and she relaxed. He slipped his hand between her legs, gently stroking her again. When his finger once more rubbed the sensitive spot, the heat in her belly stirred for a second time. That same indescribable need built, only, if possible, even more profoundly than before.

“Katherine, my beautiful lass, ye feel so good.” He began to gently move slowly in and out of her, but she could feel the supreme tension

in his body.

She writhed under the movements of his hand and body, becoming almost frenzied. “I need you, Niall,” she cried out, meeting his thrusts.

Responding to her abandon, he plunged into her again and again until she felt the heat of his seed within her. She arched against him and cried out as she reached another shuddering climax. She was astounded by her powerful reaction to his love-making and was vaguely aware that even her fingers and toes tingled. She had never imagined this bliss was possible.

He shifted his weight off her, but they remained joined as they lay there for what may have been a moment or an eternity. Finally, he eased out and moved beside her, pulling her close against him. He lightly caressed her hair and face, kissing her softly.

Finally he asked, “Did I hurt ye very much?”

“Aye,” she answered honestly, “but not for long.”

He laughed and said, “I did make ye promise never to hide anything from me.”

“Aye, ye did.”

“It won’t hurt like that again,” he reassured her.

“I hope not, because I liked everything else,” she admitted boldly. He chuckled and whispered, “I know,” kissing her again.

Chapter 7

Katherine slept soundly that night in Niall's arms.

Niall slept less soundly. He woke up during the night with her enticing round bottom tucked up against his groin and he stiffened in response. He would have happily made love to her again, but he knew the ride to Duncurra in the morning might be uncomfortable for her, so he gritted his teeth while trying to go back to sleep.

Just after dawn they left Brathanead keep and Niall walked with her to where the men prepared their horses. He took Katherine's hand before saying, "I sent word for Diarmad to bring ye something." He winked at her. "Tomas, ye can bring your lady her mount now," he called.

Grinning from ear to ear at being part of the surprise, Tomas, led a strong brown gelding out of the stable.

Katherine was thrilled and threw her arms around Niall, hugging him.

A little taken aback, he looked down at her. "It isn't that I don't enjoy having ye ride on my lap and, if ye get tired ye can ride with me, but he is yours. I know your father gave Stormy to ye and nothing can replace her, but I thought having this brown beast as your own might help."

"He is beautiful, Niall, thank you. He isn't the horse my father gave me, but he is the horse my husband gave me," she said, hugging him again. "Does he have a name?"

"Not that he told me. Tomas, did he tell ye his name?"

"Nay," said Tomas seriously, "But Diarmad did. Diarmad said his name is Eachann."

"Hello, Eachann," she said, stroking his neck in greeting.

Niall helped her mount and, at last, they headed home. In spite of his worries, they completed the journey without incident. By early afternoon, still several miles away, they could see Duncurra.

"It *is* in the middle of a loch," Tomas cried in awe.

"It certainly looks that way from here," Katherine agreed.

"This is Loch Craos. As we ride along the western edge, ye will begin to see the tail of the crag behind Duncurra. There is a wall built across the bottom of the tail that extends around the whole crag. It encircles the castle and most of the village. It makes Duncurra easy to defend." Niall couldn't keep the note of pride out of his voice.

"If there is a wall, how do ye get into it?" Tomas asked.

"Tomas, don't be silly. There will be a gate in the wall, just like at Cotharach." Katherine laughed.

"But Duncurra isn't built out of wood like Cotharach," Tomas observed.

“Nay, it isn’t. It is built from stone, but when we get close enough to see it better, ye will see a low tower built into the wall. That tower is called a ‘barbican’,” Niall explained. “In the middle of the barbican is a heavy iron gate that can be raised and lowered. It is called a portcullis.”

“Port-cull-iss,” Tomas tried the word.

The boy was enthralled, but to his surprise Katherine was, too, so Niall continued to describe the fortress. “The wall is very tall and thick near the bottom, but it becomes lower as the crag rises.”

“If it is low, couldn’t someone just climb over it?” Tomas asked.

“Where the wall is lower, the edge of the crag drops straight into the water. It would be very hard to climb out of the water, up the crag, and over the wall.”

“Why do you need a wall there, then?”

“To keep wee lads and other people from falling off the edge of the crag. Ye are never to climb on that wall, Tomas, it is very dangerous. Do ye understand?”

“Aye, I understand,” Tomas replied seriously.

Niall went on. “Do you see the two tall towers?”

“Aye.”

“Well, the men in those towers can see us, too, even though we are still quite a long way from Duncurra. What do ye think they would do if we were an enemy?”

“Close the port-cull-iss?” Tomas asked, wide-eyed.

“Aye, they would do that, but they would also have plenty of time to prepare for a fight to defend the castle. It is very hard to sneak up on Duncurra without being seen.”

~ * ~

Katherine realized how true those words were as they reached the village. Word of their approach must have spread, because it seemed that the whole clan had turned out to meet them. As Niall’s clan called words of welcome to them, Katherine smiled at them, quietly taking in her surroundings. She realized painfully that Duncurra was impoverished. Everything was well cared for but she saw signs of disrepair. Many of the cottages needed roof or wall repairs and the wall circling the crag was crumbling in places. Most distressing, however, was seeing the villagers themselves. They were thin, their clothes threadbare, and none of them wore shoes.

During the ride from Cotharach, she had given a lot of thought as to how Niall had become involved in her uncle’s scheme to seize her lands and the leadership of her clan. Not completely naïve, she knew Niall wanted her wealth badly enough to agree to marry her sight unseen, relinquishing his other rights, but she hadn’t known why. She understood many men measured their success by their financial

worth. Still, although she knew very little about Niall, after spending the last ten days with him, she had trouble believing he fell into this category. Now his reasons stood all around her. He had married her because he needed her dowry for his clan. She fully understood and respected that decision and she knew, in the same circumstances, she would have made a similar choice for the sake of her own people.

~ * ~

As Niall rode through the village with his new wife, he couldn't help but wonder what she was thinking when she saw the poor conditions. Her warm smile and graciousness towards his clansmen appeared genuine. He hadn't warned her about the rundown state of Duncurra. She had asked him about his home and clan during the evenings they spent together at Brathanead, but she never pushed for more detail than he gave, and he never revealed their desperate circumstances. He expected her condemnation now, but she gave no hint of disapproval. If anything, she appeared concerned.

When they reached the courtyard, he helped her dismount. He led her up the stairs, through a set of large double doors, and into the great hall. The great hall connected the keep's two large towers. Normally a flurry of activity, it was even more crowded than usual because of all of the people who came to greet them.

"Welcome to Duncurra, Katherine," he said.

~ * ~

Katherine looked around the great hall with interest. The most impressive feature was a massive hearth standing directly across the room from the entry doors. She noticed four doorways, one in each corner of the hall. "Where do those doors lead?"

"These two in the front lead to the two towers. The left rear door goes through to the kitchen and the other one leads to the buttery."

"The floors are timber," she noticed.

"Aye, there is a level below this one, mostly used for storage."

Katherine noticed a large refectory table surrounded by wooden chairs, standing near the far end of the hall by the hearth. Although it wasn't on a raised dais, she assumed it was the laird's table. Benches and trestle tables were stacked against the side walls, but she saw no other furniture. The room's only adornment, a frayed tapestry, hung over the hearth. While not as richly appointed as Cotharach, everything was clean, and fresh, and sweet rushes covered the floor.

Niall introduced her to Edna, the widow in charge of his household staff. Edna, a tiny ball of efficiency, was shorter than Katherine by several inches. Katherine admired her no-nonsense air. She remembered with amusement that Edna was the object of Turcuil the giant's affection. Having met her now, Katherine understood why the energetic little woman left him tongue-tied when she was near.

She had no doubt Edna could be every bit as fierce as any giant.

Niall also introduced her to an older couple, perhaps close to three score in years. Small, balding, and bookish Hendry, the steward, had an air of authority as palpable as Edna's. His strong, sturdy wife, Bridie, managed the kitchens, and while she was courteous, Katherine felt stark disapproval from the older woman.

Excited about finally reaching Duncurra, Katherine looked around eagerly. Just as Niall had described to her, the women wore a full belted *léine* under an *airisaidh*. Additionally, Bridie, Edna, and many of the other women wore a triangular white veil. She wanted to ask them about it and generally learn more about her new home and clan. Therefore, she felt profoundly disappointed when Niall said, "Edna will introduce ye to the rest of the staff over the next few days. I have been away now for almost a month and I must attend to some business that can wait no longer. She will show ye to our chamber now. I want ye to rest."

Katherine hesitated; she didn't need to rest, and there was so much she wanted to know. Her primary concern was what would happen to Tomas. She realized that when she had made the decision to bring the lad, she had not been thinking beyond his immediate safety. She wanted to ask Niall about it now.

When she didn't leave immediately, Niall arched an eyebrow at her and asked in a chilly tone, "Did ye misunderstand me?"

Surprised by his obvious displeasure, she answered, "Nay, Laird, I was going to ask you a question, but it will wait."

The look on his face told her the formal address irritated him. His voice was clipped when he responded, "Very well. I will join ye soon."

Edna cringed and a quick glance around told Katherine others, too, noted the laird's annoyance.

She nodded, embarrassed, before following Edna to the east tower. As they walked, Edna explained that the ground floors of both towers contained armories and some store rooms. The laird's family occupied the upper floors of the east tower, where there were rooms for guests as well.

"Laird MacIan's chamber is on the second floor and Fingal's is on the third. Although Diarmad isn't family strictly speaking, he also has a room on the third floor," she explained. "The unmarried members of the laird's elite guard have rooms in the west tower. Hendry and Bridie also live in the west tower, as do my children and I. Some of the servants and unmarried men-at-arms sleep on the floor of the great hall, but many live in the village."

Edna showed her into Niall's sparsely furnished chamber. It contained a large bed, a chest, a wardrobe, two wooden chairs, a small table, and a washstand. The faded green bed hangings looked

threadbare but clean, and a woolen counterpane covered the coarse linen sheets. Katherine walked over to the one window to look out. "Oh, my, the view of the loch is beautiful."

"Is there anything else ye need, my lady?" Edna asked.

"Nay, not really. I would like to learn more about Duncurra." Katherine attempted a warm smile, but she felt a little lost. She wished Edna would stay and chat with her a bit.

Edna herself seemed reluctant to go, but said gently, "My lady, there will be plenty of time for that later. Ye have just arrived after a long journey, and ye have been very ill. The laird wishes ye to rest, and so ye should. He would not be happy with either of us if we ignore his order."

"I suppose he wouldn't. I am just not in the habit of spending so much time resting."

"Well, then, take advantage of it while ye can. When ye are fully recovered, I'm sure ye'll find there is never a shortage of work."

Katherine laughed. "I'm sure there isn't."

"If there is nothing ye need, I'll leave ye to rest now." Edna left, closing the door behind her.

~ * ~

Fingal was concerned when he saw the clan's response to Lady Katherine. Highland clans tended to be very insular; even if Lady Katherine had been from another Highland clan, it would take her a while to fit in. However, being an outsider made it much worse. Niall's callous dismissal of her as soon as they entered the keep did nothing to alleviate the problem. Fingal knew why. Niall had been publicly humiliated by a woman. Anything that even hinted of disrespect goaded his brother. Unfortunately, Niall's reaction might have suggested to the clan that he was less than pleased with his new bride.

According to Diarmad, the clan was ecstatic because of the financial security resulting from the union, and they considered Lady Katherine lucky to wed their laird. *Lucky?* Fingal thought no one who truly knew Niall would consider the lass lucky. The snatches of conversation he heard were impossible to ignore.

"Can ye believe she has the nerve to show herself like that?"

"Lowlanders must all be hussies."

"She is obviously an embarrassment to the laird."

Although he hadn't given it much thought until then, he knew what the women were gossiping about. No decent, married Highland woman would appear in public without covering her hair. For them, the linen *brèid,* or kertch, was similar to wearing a wedding band. He shook his head in disgust at their reaction. Rather than thinking Lady Katherine might be unaware of the custom, the women saw it as an

insult to the laird. Sadly, he realized this would be the first of many "mistakes" the women of the clan would tally against their laird's new wife.

As he pondered this, he saw Edna reenter the hall. She appeared angry and strode toward the back door leading to the kitchens. Curious, Fingal followed her. He stopped outside the kitchen and was not surprised to find the women had gathered there to gossip, making no effort to keep their voices down. Although overseeing the preparation of the evening meal, Bridie led the charge, saying "A brazen thing she is, walking in here on the laird's arm like that."

"Aye," said another woman, "then it's off to bed with her for a nap. Weak she is."

"Or plain lazy," added another.

Then to his surprise he heard banging on the table, and in a manner befitting the laird, Edna yelled, "Enough!"

The women fell silent.

"The 'brazen thing' about whom ye are speaking is our laird's wife. Can any of ye holy women tell me how that lass was supposed to know our traditions? Do ye think the MacLennan women would have been more gracious than ye, or did ye expect our laird or the other big eejits who brought her here, worried about whether she covered her hair or not?"

There was only guilty silence.

"Bridie, who tied your kertch on ye and asked for God's blessing the day after your wedding? Caolan, Seanna, who did yours?"

The women didn't answer.

"My mother did and I suspect your mothers, or another woman who loved ye, did the same for each of ye. Who blessed this child? The uncle who beat her half to death? She has no mother, nor, it seems, any compassionate clanswoman to guide her."

Fingal smiled. The silence told him the women were sufficiently embarrassed, but Edna continued. "What other choice words did I hear? 'Weak?' Was it 'lazy' ye called her, Caolan? The laird ordered her to rest and he was right to do so. Alan said he didn't think she was going to live through the night when they arrived at Brathanead less than a sennight ago. Do ye begrudge a lass who has been that ill a rest after a long day's journey?"

Again her indictment was met with ringing silence. "Perhaps none of ye have stopped to think about this, but it seems to me the king, the lass's uncle, and our laird have all benefitted in one way or another by this marriage, but I am hard pressed to see any benefit to the lass herself. And don't tell me being wed to him is benefit enough. If ye are honest, most of ye know as well as I do marriage to him will not be easy."

Well, trust Edna to be blunt, thought Fingal with a grin, but her last weapon was clearly meant to lay them low.

"I suspect Lady Katherine will do many things over the next few months that all of ye might find odd or even insulting, but before ye decide to spew any more venom, remember Lady Katherine's wealth saved this clan, and see if ye can find a bit of compassion in your hearts for her."

Chapter 8

Niall intended only to address the most urgent issues, but as usual they were all urgent and it took longer than he thought it would. Just before the evening meal, he finally joined Katherine in his chamber, expecting to find her asleep. Instead, she stood looking out the window and the bed hadn't been disturbed. "I am fairly certain I told ye to rest," he said, more than slightly irritated.

"I did rest," she answered. "You didn't say sleep, but I couldn't have anyway. I rested in the chair and now I'm resting looking out the window," she said with a smile.

He was not amused. "Katherine, ye knew what I meant. If I ask ye to do something, I want no argument. I expect ye to do it."

Katherine considered that statement for a moment before replying with a slightly cheeky grin. "Perhaps then, you will be more specific with your next order."

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Let me try again. Come here and kiss me, wife," he commanded.

She crossed the room into his arms and gave him a chaste kiss on the lips.

"That is not at all what I had in mind," he said, and lowered his lips to hers, giving her a passionate, soul-stirring kiss. "That, my sweet little wife, is a kiss."

"Do you see how important details are?" she said audaciously.

He gave a low growl, "I would be happy to give ye plenty of details on this subject, but it will have to wait until after dinner." He kissed her again before asking, "Ye had a question earlier?"

"Aye," she answered, her expression turning serious. "I was wondering what is to be done with Tomas?"

He, too, had been trying to determine what would be best for Tomas. She seemed fond of the lad and she obviously wanted to protect him from her uncle. However, in general, Lowlanders were as class-conscious as the English. Therefore, as a peasant, the son of a stable hand, Tomas' social status was only slightly higher than a serf's. He did not want the lad growing up without a mother's love. He had warm memories of his own mother and bitter memories of Eithne's cruelty. Although she hadn't revealed the harsh side of her personality to her husband, it was evident to nearly everyone else, but perhaps most evident to her stepson. Even after she had a son of her own, nothing changed; she treated Fingal no better than she did Niall. In the lad's best interest, Niall thought perhaps it would be better for Tomas to live with the family of one of his clansmen, but he didn't want to discuss this now. He finally answered, "I haven't decided yet. For tonight he will stay with Fingal as he has been. We will discuss it

in the morning."

Although Katherine didn't appear happy about it, she said no more.

Wanting to banish the solemn look from her face, Niall kissed her again. Her warm response pleased him immeasurably, and the kiss had its desired effect; she no longer looked troubled. "Ye're distracting me again, lass. My clan will starve if ye don't desist."

"I'm distracting you?"

"Well, the details on who is distracting whom may be a bit fuzzy. We will have to work them out later," he said with a wink and, taking her elbow, led her downstairs for the evening meal.

Niall walked to the refectory table in the great hall with Katherine on his arm. Generally, everyone who lived or worked in and around the keep ate their meals on the trestle tables, while the laird's family and invited guests dined at his table. Diarmad and Fingal were seated there, as well as Alan. Niall introduced their other guests, Cairbre, his other captain, Cairbre's wife, Maude, and Alan's wife, Effie. Katherine appeared thrilled to see Tomas at the table too, and gave the lad a quick hug before taking her seat.

She seemed to enjoy the company of the two women. Effie and Maude told her stories about their families and the clan and kept Katherine laughing through the meal. Niall conversed with his men, but Katherine's voice or her musical laughter frequently distracted him and he often caught himself gazing at her.

"Laird, are ye listening?" he heard Cairbre ask.

"Listening? My apologies, I was preoccupied for a moment."

"A moment? Ye have been preoccupied all evening," Cairbre answered. "Ye can't take your eyes off her. Has she captured your heart, lad?"

Momentarily taken aback, Niall recovered quickly. "Make no mistake, Cairbre," he said soberly, "she is lovely and she pleases me. I am glad she is my wife, but my heart was never part of this bargain."

The Laird retired with his wife as soon as the evening meal ended. It had been a very long day and his yearning to taste her charms once again had only intensified during the meal. This surely was what Cairbre had perceived. Once they reached their chamber, Niall pulled her into his arms and kissed her. She was so sweet and responsive. He wondered how he had been able to think of anything other than kissing her since he first captured her lips in the chapel at Cotharach. If he thought giving in to into those desires the previous evening at Brathanead would quench his need, he realized now he was sorely mistaken. He explored her mouth zealously with his tongue as she responded eagerly.

He pulled her hair loose from the braid, running his fingers

through it. Clutching the silky lengths, he sought her mouth, finding her kisses and mewling responses intoxicating. He undressed her as he had the night before, but tonight she returned the favor, removing his plaid and belt.

"Ye are too tall, bend down. I can't get your tunic off."

Bending forward he said, "It is also called a *léine,* but ye can call it anything ye wish, as long as ye remove it. I love the feel of your hands on me."

Obliging, she removed the garment, rubbing his shoulders. She ran her hands lightly through the sandy hair on his chest before clasping them behind his neck and boldly pulling him into another kiss. He gave a low growl of pure pleasure, as her delicate touch made him shudder with desire. He had never wanted anyone as much as he did this sweet little morsel in his arms. He lifted and carried her to the bed.

As he had the night before, he took a moment to savor the exquisitely beautiful lass lying naked in his bed with her shimmering hair spread beneath her. She blushed shyly, but it pleased him that she didn't attempt to cover herself.

"I don't think I will ever tire of looking at you, sweetling." He lowered himself onto the bed beside her, kissed her forehead, and rubbed his cheek against her hair. "You are sweet enough to eat," he said, burying his face in her neck, kissing and nibbling at it until she giggled. That musical sound, which had distracted him all evening, was now his alone to enjoy.

She appeared to lose herself in the sensations, responding to his touch and exploring his hard muscled body with her hands. He teased her nipples into hard peaks, flicking them lightly with his tongue. He grinned when he heard her swift intake of air and he continued suckling one breast while he rubbed the firm peak of the other. He slid his hand down her body, finding the spot that had driven her mad the evening before. Moaning, she pushed into his touch, seeking more. "I love your touch, too," she whispered, her blush deepening.

Her uninhibited response thrilled him. All conscious thought fled and he became aware only of the fire growing within him. As she writhed against him, the almost unbearably intense sensations overwhelmed him. Her unrestrained response increased his own desire until he ached to possess her completely. He pushed her legs apart and entered her with as much restraint as he could muster. He did not want to risk hurting her, but she crushed his good intentions. She was like a wild thing rising to meet him. She drove him deep within her, over and over again, until he felt her muscles contract around him as she reached her climax moments before he exploded with his own release.

He panted as, his head dropped to her forehead. He eased his weight off her, lying at her side, his hands still caressing her silken skin.

Breathless, she looked up at him, her green eyes dark with passion. As he ran his hand lightly down her body, she shivered.

"Lass, ye delight me," he said huskily.

She smiled. "I haven't quite figured out what it is you do to me."

He laughed and pulled her to him so her back was to his chest and his arms encircled her. "Well, I guess I'll just have to keep doing it then, at least until you get it sorted out," he said, and kissed her head.

~ * ~

In moments his breathing had become slow and regular and she knew he had drifted off to sleep. She found that a little astonishing because she felt energized. As she listened to his deep steady breaths, she enjoyed feeling the weight of his arms around her.

She had never really imagined what it might be like to fall in love, or to feel loved by a man. Smiling to herself, she supposed that as a young lass she might have had some romantic notions about love. She couldn't really remember too much about her parents' relationship. As in her marriage, her parents barely knew each other when they wed, but they had seemed affectionate. She remembered her father's sorrow when her mother died. Maybe they had grown to love each other.

After her father died, she'd had precious little time to think of much else other than protecting her clan and herself from her vicious uncle. The fear of who her uncle might choose for her accompanied any thought of marriage, so she avoided romantic thoughts at all costs.

Now she found herself in the arms of a husband who, by all accounts, was a good man who was respected by his clan. She enjoyed his company and she reveled in his love-making. She knew she could love Niall, but she feared he could not love her in return. She had heard him tell Cairbre, "My heart was never part of this bargain." A voice inside told her to tread carefully; there would be pain on this road. It would be best to accept what Niall could offer, but at all costs protect her heart.

Then Father James' words came back to her. *You have learned the surest way to open yourself to hurt is to love, and yet you love anyway.* She realized it was too late. Not only *could* she love him, but she feared she had already lost her heart. *If you can't love me back, Niall, please, please, don't hurt me too badly.*

~ * ~

The sun had risen when Niall woke in the morning with the beautiful nymph from last night still in his arms. The lacerations on her back had mostly healed, leaving red scars. He knew eventually

they would fade, joining the other fine white lines there, but he wondered if he would ever be able to look at them without a murderous rage building. He leaned down to kiss her white shoulder.

She stirred and rolled over to face him. Smiling sleepily, she said, “Good morning.”

“Good morning, my sweet,” he said and kissed her.

She stretched like a cat as she wrapped her arms around him, returning his kiss full measure. He wanted nothing more than to make love to her again as he had last night, but he knew he should give her a little time. He pulled away, saying, “Ah, temptress, we will have to pick this up later, or nothing will ever be accomplished at Duncurra again.”

“Well, then, get off me, ye brute,” she said, laughing. As he rolled to his side, she hopped out of bed, washed quickly, and dressed. After watching her for a bit, he, too, rose to dress and as he did, she asked, “Niall, have you given any more thought to Tomas?”

He really didn’t want to start the morning out with this, but he knew he had to address the issue. Resigned to it he answered, “Some. Tell me, why was Tomas living in the stable at Cotharach?”

“Because I was fond of him and my uncle is cruel.”

He frowned and said, “I was looking for a bit more information than that.”

She sighed, “It isn’t just that Uncle Ambrose is cruel, it is almost as if he enjoys causing pain. He takes pleasure in his victim’s reaction to it.”

The anger Niall felt earlier, when looking at her scarred back, rose again.

Katherine paced as she explained. “I learned if I controlled my emotions and didn’t let him see he was hurting me, he soon lost interest in trying. Then he discovered he could hurt me through other people. If he saw me show someone a kindness, causing that person pain became another way to punish me. When Tomas’ grandfather died a few months ago, Uncle Ambrose found a new target in the boy. He said he was being very generous to let Tomas live in the stable and if anyone interfered, they would be punished. I interfered a bit.”

Niall arched an eyebrow. “The scars on your back suggest ye interfered more than a bit.”

“All right, I interfered a lot, but no one else dared.”

Niall thought about this for a moment. “So you feel responsible for him?”

“Partially, I suppose.” Her brow furrowed as she appeared to consider her feelings about the little boy.

“I have clansmen with families who would take him in.”

She looked stricken. “Do you think that is best? I was hoping—I

was just hoping…" she stammered. "Niall, please, can he not just stay with us?"

Niall reached for her to stop her pacing. With his hands on her shoulders, he said, "As what Katherine—a stable boy? He needs parents."

"Can we not be his parents?"

"Ye are asking me to claim a Lowland peasant child as my foster son?"

"It doesn't matter to me that he was a peasant. I—I'm sorry, I didn't think it would matter to you. I love him," she finished somewhat helplessly.

She had finally said the words he wanted to hear. "That doesn't matter to me. I want him to have parents who love him." He paused again, considering the decision he was about to make. "I think he will. He is ours."

She rewarded him with a heart-stopping smile and, to his surprise, threw her arms around him and kissed him soundly.

~ * ~

When they arrived in the great hall they found a number of people there breaking their fast. Fingal, Diarmad, and Tomas sat at the laird's table.

Before Niall and Katherine joined them, Edna, Bridie, and several other women approached. Edna said, "Laird, there is something the women of the clan would like to give Lady Katherine."

He nodded to her and she turned to Katherine.

"My lady, it is a Highland tradition that when a woman is married, she covers her hair with a kertch." She indicated the covering on her own head. "It is a triangle of pure white linen and represents the Holy Trinity, under whose guidance the bride will walk. By custom, the bride's mother or another clanswoman ties it on her head the morning after her wedding, asking for God's blessing on the new bride."

Bridie stepped forward and said, "We became your clanswomen when ye married our laird and, although a few mornings have passed since your wedding, we would like to give ye a kertch now." She tied the kertch on Katherine's head. Together the women said the prayer for God's blessing and each one gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Overcome by the gesture, Katherine let several tears slipped down her cheeks before she could blink them back. "Thank you," she whispered.

Edna gave her a quick hug, and the other women curtsied before excusing themselves.

Niall hadn't thought much about it, frankly, but the fact that his clanswomen had welcomed her in this way pleased him. Even though

it was not a custom in the Lowlands, the gracious way in which Katherine had accepted it also pleased him. Smiling, he took her hand, guiding her to the table. She wiped away her tears as they sat down. Tomas looked at her seriously and said in a loud whisper to Fingal, “Lady Katherine doesn’t like people to see her cry.”

“It’s all right, Tomas,” she said, embarrassed. “These are happy tears.”

“Tomas,” Niall said, his voice sounding very serious.

“Aye, Laird?” Tomas answered in a small voice.

“Lady Katherine and I have decided ye need to have a family; ye need parents.”

“But I don’t know how to get a family.” Tomas sounded concerned.

“That’s all right, you don’t need to worry about that.” Katherine knelt beside him. “We thought maybe you would like for us to be your parents.”

“Really? Can I call you Mama?”

“Aye, sweetheart,” she said, and he flung himself into her arms, nearly knocking her over with his fierce hug. Then he looked shyly up at Niall and asked in another loud whisper, “What do I call the laird?”

“I think ‘Da’ will be fine.” Niall said and Tomas threw his arms around Niall’s legs.

Fingal laughed, saying, “Before ye ask, Tomas, ye can call me Uncle Fingal.”

Chapter 9

With Edna's help, Katherine slipped easily into life at Duncurra during the next several weeks. Her days fell into a comfortable rhythm. Although she was in the habit of waking very early, Niall generally arose before her. He had usually dressed and gone by the time she woke. He spent much of the day away from the keep, seeing to the needs of the clan and the training of his men, while she managed the keep.

Katherine looked forward to the evenings when they sat together by the hearth in the great hall before retiring. While no one could ever forget Niall was their laird, he seemed more relaxed and at his ease during this time. Fingal and Diarmad nearly always joined them, as did other guardsmen occasionally. Tomas also liked to stay with them at least long enough to hear several stories before Katherine put him to bed. During these relaxed evenings, she began to see the man she married more clearly.

When they did retire, she found joy with him she had never dared to hope for. One evening as they lay in each other's arms, savoring the afterglow of their love-making, the gold ring on her left hand caught her eye. She smiled to herself as she remembered her thoughts about it on her wedding day. As each day passed she recognized that the stranger to whom the king had given her hand now very firmly held her heart.

Happier than she had been in many years, Katherine embraced her Highland clansmen and their culture without reserve. She found the women of her new clan more than willing to help her adjust. She hadn't had a woman in her life to guide and help her since her mother's death, and it pleased her when every matron in the clan, most particularly Bridie, treated her like a daughter. It was not uncommon to hear, "Och, lass, let me show ye now, if ye do that this way...," She was genuinely happy to learn from them. She didn't mind the familiarity. It also wasn't uncommon to hear her say to an older woman, "Och, Ana, that is much too heavy for ye to lift. Let me get it." Truthfully, she knew exactly how to run a castle and she worked as hard as her clanswomen did, which earned her their respect.

Learning how to live with the man she had married proved to be a bit more difficult. As laird, he ruled the clan without question. The words he said to her on her first evening at Duncurra, *Katherine, if I ask ye to do something, I want no argument. I expect ye to do it*, came back to her over and over again.

Katherine had no idea how difficult that seemingly simple request would be for her. It seemed odd in a way because her uncle had certainly been demanding. If he gave her a specific order, she followed

it, or at least her interpretation of it. However, other than the things he needed to ensure his own personal comfort, he didn't really care about much else. She found Niall much more demanding in many ways, and while he would never raise a hand to her, she managed to raise his ire frequently. More often than not this happened because she broke a rule she either didn't know or didn't understand. In some cases she didn't quite realize something he said was an order.

On one of these occasions Katherine was working in one of the kitchens preparing an infusion of wych elm. When it came to preparing the plants and herbs she used in medicines, she preferred to complete the tasks herself to ensure the best results. Although time for the midday meal approached, she didn't expect Niall back at Duncurra until evening. She planned to finish her task and, if necessary, give orders to serve the meal without her. One of the serving maids found her in the kitchen.

"Lady Katherine, the laird has just arrived."

"He's back already? I didn't expect him until much later."

"He said he is ready for the meal to be served."

Intent on her work, Katherine said cheerily, "Oh, please begin without me, then."

In a few minutes the maid was back, saying, "My lady, the laird asks ye to join him for the meal."

"Well, please tell him I can't leave just at the moment. I need to finish this. Go ahead and serve the meal, and I will be along in a bit."

Moments later a white-faced Bridie found her and said, "Och, lass, the laird's in a fine temper. I will finish this for ye. Go."

"What is he in a temper over?" Katherine asked, thoroughly confused.

"Lass, did Seanna not just come and tell ye the laird wants ye to join him for the meal?"

"Aye, but—"

"If he wants ye to join him, ye'd best not keep him waiting," she said, shooing her away from the kettle.

Exasperated, Katherine went into the hall. It was unusually quiet and the glare with which he pierced her as she entered would have put the fear of God into most people. When she reached the table, she said matter-of-factly "You're angry."

"Aye. I'm angry."

Glancing at the table, she saw Diarmad suddenly rubbing his brow, looking as if he was trying desperately not to laugh.

"Why?" she asked.

"Why?" he repeated incredulously. "Ye defied me."

"Defied you?" She sounded astonished. "I'm terribly sorry. I certainly didn't intend to defy you."

“Ye didn’t intend—Katherine, sit down,” he growled and motioned for the meal to be served.

When the noise in the hall rose to normal levels, Katherine leaned over and said sweetly, “Niall, how did I defy you?”

Diarmad shook in silent laughter.

Now it was Niall who looked astonished. “Were ye not told that I wanted ye to join me l?”

“Aye.”

“And did ye not say me nay?”

“Not exactly, I didn’t realize it was a command, and I just couldn’t leave what I was doing at that moment.”

“Katherine, if I ask ye to do something, I expect ye to do it. I don’t care what else ye are doing at the time. I will not tolerate defiance. Don’t do it again.”

His anger seemed diffused and she ate in silence for a few minutes before asking, “Just so I understand, what do you mean by ‘defiance’?”

Looking even more astounded, he asked, “Do ye truly not understand what the word means?”

“Oh, nay,” Katherine said lightly, “I understand what it means. I am just wondering if it means the same thing to both of us.”

A muscle in Niall’s jaw twitched. “Defiance means willful disobedience. Do we understand each other?”

“Aye, I think we do. So you agree I didn’t defy you and your anger is misplaced.”

“Ye didn’t—I—what?”

“Well, I didn’t realize I had been given a command, thus I couldn’t have made a conscious or willful choice not to follow it. So based on your definition, I didn’t defy you; I was simply confused and you shouldn’t be angry.” She calmly turned her attention back to her trencher.

Niall stared blankly at her for a moment. He chuckled softly, but soon his chuckles evolved to uproarious laughter. When he finally had control of himself again he said, “My lady, I apologize. In the future I will try to make my wishes clearer.”

“It will certainly save you a tremendous amount of upset if you do,” she said imperiously, and he laughed again.

When he had stopped laughing and they were no longer the center of attention, she put her hand on his arm, leaned towards him again, and said in a voice only he could hear, “Niall, please don’t always assume the worst of me. It was a misunderstanding. I would never intentionally defy you.”

Katherine had no idea how difficult that simple request was for him.

Chapter 10

Fingal had said Niall "protects his own," but it took Katherine a while to really understand what that meant. She loved to go riding, but she had been so focused on the management of Duncurra, she hadn't been on Eachann's back since the day she arrived. On one late summer day, the open heath outside of Duncurra's walls practically called to her. She needed to replenish some of her herbs, so she gathered the supplies required for collecting them and headed to the stables. When she asked a stable hand to saddle Eachann for her, he seemed confused and asked, "Are ye riding to the village?"

"I need to gather some medicinal herbs," she answered by way of explanation.

"In the village?"

She laughed. "Nay, lad, there are not many herbs growing in the village."

The boy looked uncomfortable and asked, "So ye are planning to ride outside the walls?"

She laughed again. "Aye, lad. I will need to if I want to gather herbs."

"Then where is your escort, my lady?"

"My escort? I don't need any help."

Looking even more uncomfortable, he said, "My lady, ye can't ride outside the walls of Duncurra without an escort. It wouldn't be safe. The laird would never allow it. If ye will wait a bit, I will find the laird or Diarmad so an escort can be arranged."

She smiled at him and said, "Nay, lad. Thank you, but I don't wish to pull anyone away from more important work."

Disappointed, she left the stables. It seemed silly to tie up manpower with an escort, especially since she didn't really need to ride. She just wanted to for the enjoyment of it. She could gather much of what she required just beyond the village, so she strolled down the sloping crag through the crofts. When she reached the barbican, the watch there stopped her. "My lady, I can't let ye pass."

"Excuse me?" she asked, not quite believing what she heard. "I'm just going to gather some herbs in the heath beyond the village."

"I'm sorry, my lady, if ye will just wait a moment, I will send for a guardsman to go with ye."

"That really won't be necessary," said Katherine, feeling a bit irritated. "I'm not going far."

"I'm sorry, my lady, but the laird would not want ye to go outside Duncurra's walls without an escort. It will only take a few minutes to fetch one of the guardsmen," he said, motioning to another of the men-at-arms to go and do just that.

Katherine put her hand up to stop him. “Nay, thank you, but it isn’t necessary.” She turned to walk back through the village and up the hill to the keep. *This is completely ridiculous*. How was she supposed to gather the supplies she needed? She certainly had no intention of arguing with a stable boy or men-at-arms when they only followed orders, but she would have a discussion about it with Niall as soon as she could be alone with him.

The discussion didn’t wait that long. Katherine had barely swallowed her first bite of the evening meal when Niall asked, “Where were ye going today that ye didn’t want an escort?”

His voice sounded very nonchalant, but when she looked at him she could see the displeasure written plainly on his face. She wanted to tell him how she felt about being little more than a prisoner in her home. Instead she said, “Niall, can we talk about this later, when we are alone?”

“I asked ye a question, Katherine, and I want an answer,” he pressed, his annoyance now clearly expressed in his tone.

“I wanted to go to the heath to gather some herbs I need for medicines.” She hoped that answer would do for now.

“Why couldn’t you do that with an escort?”

“It wasn’t that I couldn’t gather herbs with an escort; I didn’t think it was necessary to pull someone away from their work for something as ridiculous as watching me gather herbs.” Now Katherine was getting angry, too. “Please, can we discuss this later?”

“There is nothing more to discuss. If ye need to leave the walls of Duncurra, ye will have an escort.” Niall said this loudly enough that those sitting closest to them stared.

Katherine nodded but said nothing. There was more to discuss but she wouldn’t do it here. She shifted her attention back to her trencher.

“Do ye understand me?”

Raising her head slowly, she leveled a glare at him and said very quietly, “Neither my hearing nor my intellect are impaired. I understand you perfectly.”

“Are ye angry with me?” he asked, sounding surprised.

She pulled the reins of her temper back in and adopted an unconcerned expression, before saying calmly, “It doesn’t matter. I understand there is nothing more to discuss.”

“Ye disagree?” Again he seemed astounded.

Of course, she disagreed, she thought angrily. She would not have asked to discuss it later if she felt there was nothing to discuss. She wanted to yell that at him but to do so would only raise his ire further and make everyone around them painfully uncomfortable. “I would never disagree with you in public.”

This seemed to appease him and soon Diarmad drew him into

conversation. She picked at the meal in front of her, but she had no appetite left for it. When a sufficient amount of time had passed and Tomas had finished eating, she excused herself to take him for a bath and ready him for bed.

Generally only the laird and the lady or their honored guests had a bath prepared for them in an upstairs chamber. Most everyone else bathed behind a screened area in one of the kitchens, where they could heat the water and fill the bath with much less effort. Katherine sent Fineen, one of Duncurra's chamber maids, to get a fresh *léine* for Tomas while she led him to the kitchen. Never happy about having to stop playing and wash, Tomas grumbled and complained through the entire bath.

She felt hot and tired, not to mention still very angry, by the time she finally had him tucked in bed. The last thing she wanted to do was go back down to the great hall. She retired to their chamber to spend the rest of the evening alone, sewing.

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After the meal, Niall sat brooding by the hearth with Diarmad and Fingal.

"What ails ye, brother?" Fingal asked.

Niall shook his head, took a long pull of ale from his tankard, and didn't answer.

"If I had to guess," offered Diarmad, "I would say it was the argument he had with his wee wife at the table."

"That isn't your concern."

"Nay, Laird, it probably isn't. But then I am not the one who brought the issue up during the meal for all to hear, am I?"

Niall just glared.

"What issue?" asked Fingal, who hadn't heard the discussion.

"According to the watch, Lady Katherine wanted to go walking beyond the village this afternoon, but did not seem to think she needed an escort. She wouldn't let him call one for her and she returned to the keep."

"Why would she do that?" asked Fingal.

"That's what I asked her," growled Niall.

"What did she say?"

Niall shook his head again, and took another drink from his tankard.

"She said she would prefer to talk about it privately," answered Diarmad.

"Then go talk to her," said Fingal reasonably. "Surely the lad is in bed by now."

"Now, ye see, Fingal, that is where the problem started," said Diarmad.

“There is nothing to discuss. There is no reason for her to leave the walls alone and I told her that,” said Niall angrily. “Why would she want to?” The suspicion in his tone was clear.

Fingal sighed. “It always comes back to that, Niall. She isn’t mother…or Ceana.” Niall gave Fingal a murderous glare, but his brother was not dissuaded. “Can’t ye see ye married a guileless lass? Do ye truly believe Katherine set out to deceive ye?”

“Why would she shun an escort otherwise?” Niall demanded.

“I don’t know. Perhaps she doesn’t understand why she needs one. Did ye ask her why?”

“How could she possibly think she doesn’t need one? And aye, I did ask her why, but her answer didn’t make any sense,” Niall said dismissively.

“She said she didn’t think it was necessary to pull someone away from other duties,” Diarmad explained.

Fingal laughed. “Niall, she doesn’t understand.”

“How could she not understand? She is a noblewoman. Surely she has been guarded her whole life. Why would she think it different here?” Niall’s anger was rising. He yelled, “What does she think I have a guard for anyway, if not to protect what is important to me?”

Fingal asked, “Is it possible her loving uncle did not assure she was guarded, and so she doesn’t expect to be guarded here?”

“That is ridiculous.”

“Is it?” asked Fingal. “We are talking about the lass who looked like a servant when you first met her, are we not? The same one whose uncle not only laid her back open with a whip, but happily married her to an impoverished stranger for his own gain? Ambrose Ruthven had absolutely nothing to lose by risking her life.”

Diarmad swore and said, “It’s a wonder she lived long enough for the king to marry her off. There should be a special place in hell for beasts like Ruthven.”

“Aye, and I would love to be the one to send him there,” Niall growled.

“Go talk to her, Niall,” Fingal urged.

Niall shook head in exasperation, rose, and walked toward the entrance to the tower.

Just before leaving the hall he overheard Diarmad say to Fingal, “Do you suppose he will ever learn all women are not apples from the same tree?” He ignored the comment and climbed the stairs to his chamber. Entering, he found Katherine sitting in a chair, sewing by the light of a candle. She was a vision with her cloud of hair floating softly around her shoulders, wearing only a shift. She didn’t look up as he entered the room. He took off his plaid then sat in the other chair before speaking.

“Katherine, how many men did your uncle set to guard ye at Cotharach?”

“I required no guard at Cotharach,” she said in a slightly defensive tone.

Niall arched an eyebrow, “Ye have never had guards charged with your safety?”

“Not since I was a little girl.”

“Just exactly when did ye stop needing protection?”

“I don’t know. After my father died, I guess, when the Ruthven holdings became mine.”

“Why would ye stop needing protection then?”

“Because—it was my home, they were my people.”

“So when your father was alive, he travelled around his lands with no guard?”

Katherine thought for a moment. “I don’t remember. Nay, I think he was usually accompanied by at least one of his men.”

“Katherine, ye were four and ten when your father died. If he never traveled around his holdings alone, why would it be safe for ye to?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t go very far and there were more important things for the guards to do.”

“Sweetling, what could possibly be more important than the safety of their lady?”

She looked at him as if she was trying to come up with a logical answer but couldn’t.

“Come here,” he said.

She lay her sewing aside with a frustrated sigh and crossed to where he sat. He pulled her gently onto his lap and put his arms around her. “I can only guess at why your uncle didn’t ensure your protection, and it is probably only by the grace of God ye came to no harm. The country abounds with thieves and banished clansmen. I suspect your uncle has his share of enemies, too. I’m sure your father knew the dangers, because he secured your safety as well as his own. Why would ye expect me to do less than that?”

“That’s not what I—you misunderstood—I—I can’t waste your guards’ time just to gather herbs,” she said, as if it made perfect sense to her.

“What do ye suppose my guards do, if not protect what I value?”

“But what harm could come to me just beyond the village?”

“I don’t ever want to find out,” he said, kissing her head. “And I won’t because ye won’t leave the walls without an escort,” he said firmly. Before she could argue more, he added, “Katherine, guarding ye is an honor, not a chore, and nothing the members of my guard do is more important.”

Still sounding miffed, Katherine asked, “If I wasn’t allowed outside of the walls without an escort, why did you not tell me that?”

“I didn’t think I had to.”

“But you had to tell your men.”

“Nay, I didn’t. Sweetling, like your father, I rarely leave Duncurra alone. My men know the dangers and would certainly not let ye venture out without a guard, whether I had given an order or not.”

She sighed and after a moment said, “I guess I can’t stay angry with you, then.”

“Nay, ye cannot. I won’t allow it.” He buried his face in her neck, kissing her until she giggled. Then he captured her lips in a kiss intended to make her forget she was ever angry in the first place.

He carried her gently to the bed, removed her shift, and made slow tender love to her. Later, as she lay sleeping in his arms, he marveled once again at his good fortune in gaining such a sweet bride. The thought of what might have happened to her in the years under her uncle’s control made him shudder. The thought of losing her now chilled his very soul. He finally admitted to himself it was neither admiration nor gratitude giving rise to these feelings. He was fond of her. Perhaps he was more than fond.

Chapter 11

The next morning, Niall waited for Katherine at the breakfast table. “This is a surprise,” she said happily as she joined him.

“It is the first of several I have planned today,” he said mysteriously.

“Who else do you plan to surprise?” she asked, laughing.

“Oh, my sweet little wife, the surprises are all for ye.” She gave him the brilliant smile he adored. “I realize I have spent very little time getting to know ye since we were wed.”

She blushed and said very softly, “My dear husband, if we spent any more time ‘knowing’ each other, I fear nothing would ever be accomplished here.”

He laughed. “Aren’t ye the cheeky little wench this morning?”

She blushed even deeper.

“Now that ye mention it, I may have to allow a bit of time for that particular pursuit, but I had something else in mind. It looks to be a fine day, and I thought perhaps ye would like to go out riding with me. Ye can see more of the MacIan lands than Duncurra and its village, and we can spend some time alone.”

“I would love to go riding with you,” she answered, overjoyed.

When they finished eating, he took her hand. “Shall we go?”

“I will meet you in the stable. There are some things I need Edna to take care of today. I will only be a few minutes.” When she arrived at the stable, Cairbre, Muir, and Turcuil were also preparing mounts. She whispered to Niall, “I thought you said we were spending the day alone?”

He whispered back, “I thought I told ye I rarely left Duncurra without guardsmen, and ye were never to leave without them. But don’t worry, they will keep their distance.” Then in a normal voice, he said, “What have ye brought there?”

“The supplies required to collect the odd herb or plant I might find.”

“Lass, this is not a day for work. Ye can gather herbs tomorrow—with an escort.”

She laughed and grinned. “I won’t gather common herbs, but if I see something rarer to come by, it would be foolish to leave it behind, would it not?”

“I suppose,” he agreed, feigning disappointment.

She laughed again.

He helped her mount Eachann and they headed out. “Niall, what about Tomas?” she asked in alarm before they reached the barbican.

“Taken care of,” he said smugly. “I have assigned Uncle Fingal to keep an eye on him today. Later Alan or Keith will go with them to

the loch to fish and swim." At the look of surprise on her face, he said, "My foster son doesn't leave Duncurra without a sufficient escort, either."

"Aye, husband, I'm beginning to see a pattern. You've made your point."

When they reached the heath, as Niall had promised, the guardsmen fell back to a discreet distance. Katherine was suddenly and inexplicably shy. Finally breaking the silence, she asked, "Where are we going?"

"I thought we would ride around the northern side of Loch Craos, then east a bit. The raids have occurred at the western edge of my holding and, while none were during the day, I don't want you anywhere near Matheson land."

At midmorning they came to a marshy area on the northeastern side of the loch and she asked, "Niall, can we stop here for a bit? Marshes harbor many useful plants and herbs."

"I did not intend for ye to work on this excursion."

"It isn't work. Please, I just want to see what might be growing here."

Her eyes shown with excitement and he couldn't refuse her. He handed their horses off to Muir and walked with her towards the marsh. To his surprise, his wife removed her shoes and *airisaidh* before pulling the hem of her *léine* between her legs and tucking it into her belt in the front. This pulled the bottom of the garment up to just below her knees. "What are ye doing?" he asked.

"I have to wade in a bit to see everything and I don't want my clothes to get wet."

"Can't ye just look from the edge?"

Katherine's musical laughter enveloped him. "Can ye hunt without going into the forest? All I can see from the edge is the tall purple loosestrife and that is easy to find close to Duncurra. Come with me. I'll show you what the marsh hides." She beckoned, holding her hand out to him.

How could he resist? Taking her hand, he waded in with her.

She pointed out a variety of common plants. She was pleased when she found bog bean, but became positively delighted when she discovered something she called marsh mallow.

"I wasn't sure I would find it this far north. It grew in the marshes near Cotharach, but it isn't very common in colder areas. It's an amazing plant; the flowers, the leaves, even the roots, are useful. Late summer is the perfect time of year to harvest it, too." She gathered some, saying, "You'll thank me the next time you get a sore throat."

"I'll thank ye to leave the muck of this marsh behind," he said. At her look of dismay, he softened his tone and caressed her cheek. "I'm

teasing, pet, but ye needn't gather it all now. I will send men to harvest a larger quantity on another day."

"All right, if ye promise," she said with a shy smile.

They waded back out of the marsh, but she continued to talk about the plants they passed and their uses. This completely enthralled Niall. In the last few weeks he had seen several sides of his bride. There was the quiet, submissive maid he first met at Cotharach, who kept a firm check on her emotions but who, when pushed too hard, could unleash her anger with a vengeance. There was also the strong and compassionate lady of the castle, whom so many of his clansmen and women already respected and loved, as well as the gentle mother who cared very deeply for Tomas. Of course, one of his favorite sides was the uninhibited lover whose passion never failed to delight him. However, the woman he walked with now brimmed with knowledge, and had a confidence and self-assurance he had never seen in any woman. She impressed him and he felt oddly proud of her.

After their brief stop at the marsh, they rode east and entered the forest, where they soon arrived at a beautiful glade. His guard positioned themselves in the forest around the glade, again at a discreet distance, leaving Niall and Katherine quite alone. He spread a plaid on the ground before producing a packet of food and a wineskin from the bag on his saddle. They chatted as they ate.

"I am having a wonderful time," she said.

"So am I," he answered with a smile.

"I was just wondering..."

"Mmm?"

"Well, with so much to do, why did you decide to waste the day with me?"

He chuckled. "That is one of the reasons right there."

"What?" she asked, confused.

"A day spent with ye is not wasted, sweetling."

"Oh, I didn't mean—I—"

He put his finger to her lips. "I know what ye meant even if ye don't," he said gently. "I realized last night ye don't recognize your own value. On the day we married, ye said your uncle cared less for ye than he did his saddle."

She blushed and looked away. "I'm sorry, I was—upset."

"I know, and ye had every right to be. But even after hearing ye say that and knowing how cruel your uncle was, I still thought of ye as a noblewoman. As the head of your clan, I assumed ye would have been treated that way. Last night I learned, at least where ye are concerned, my assumptions are frequently wrong.

"Katherine, ye are dear to me, and I realized that since our marriage I have done very little to show ye that. I was immensely

irritated with myself when it finally occurred to me this issue hadn't arisen before yesterday because ye haven't been outside the walls of Duncurra since ye arrived."

She blushed and shook her head. "It's not important—there were things—I—," she stammered.

"Wheest, lass, I'm not humbled often, let me suffer a moment."

She laughed, her embarrassment subsiding. "Will you at least try not to assume the worst in the future?"

"Aye, lass, I will try," he said with a grin, "but I fear I am a very flawed man, and set in my ways. It may take a few tries before I get the knack of it."

"Och, laddie, I fear I'll be giving ye plenty of practice at that particular skill," she said, adopting Bridie's manner of speaking.

"Will ye now?" he asked, all humility forgotten. "Then perhaps I shall give ye some practice at a different skill? It is, after all, the least I can do in anticipation of your kind tutelage."

She giggled as he captured her lips and lowered her gently to the ground. The giggles transformed rapidly to moans of carnal pleasure as he plundered her mouth with his tongue and caressed her lush breasts. He gloried in her sensual response to every kiss and caress and she returned his attention in kind, stoking his desire for her. He realized how much he relished her delight. He had bedded his share of women and believed he never left them unsatisfied, but this was different. Her ecstasy became his own; he had never experienced anything to match it.

After their exquisite joining, they lay silently in each other's arms as if neither wanted to break the enchantment of the moment, until one of the horses whickered softly, the noise bringing him back to the present. "As much as I hate to end this," he said, propping himself on his elbow beside her, "I suppose I shall have to take ye back."

"I suppose so," she agreed. "But feel free to waste your day with me anytime the notion strikes ye, Laird."

"Cheeky wench."

chapter 12

After the extraordinary day they'd spent together, Niall sought her company much more often. Several days later he waited for her at breakfast again.

"More surprises?" she asked.

"I thought ye might like to see more of my land, perhaps meet some of the MacIan farmers."

"How much more land is there?"

"Ye can ride for several hours in any direction without leaving our holding. Most of the farmers live in small clusters scattered throughout our land. My men-at-arms serve sentry duty to ensure the safety of the whole clan, but I, too, make regular visits to make sure all is well with them."

"And here I thought you only built walls and trained warriors," she teased.

"Ah, my clever lass, ye do have a few things to learn. The warriors may be our clan's strength and protection, but the farmers are its sustenance, so they are every bit as important."

After breakfast, they rode out again with an escort, this time traveling northward. After they had ridden a while they neared a small field of oats. "You do have grain fields. I wondered because I haven't seen any until now. I'm sure you saw that Cotharach was surrounded by fields of wheat and barley."

"We do grow some grain and a few other subsistence crops, but the Highland environment is very harsh. Not to mention the fact that our land isn't well suited to growing much. We rely heavily on animal products, mostly wool, for income, with which we buy other things we need. A hail storm has little effect on our sturdy Highland beasts, but it can completely destroy a field of grain."

"I see. I guess that makes raiders an even bigger problem."

"Aye, it does. Even the loss of a few animals to raiders can devastate an already poor clan."

~ * ~

When they reached the first small cluster of crofts, the farmers and their families stopped their work to greet their laird. Niall introduced her, but the people seemed cautious around her. She tried to draw some of the women into conversation while Niall spoke with their husbands, but while they were not disrespectful, they were guarded. Not wishing to make them uncomfortable, Katherine let it go. Instead she watched Niall's interactions with his clansmen and saw a completely different side of him. After they remounted their horses and rode away, she commented, "You are different somehow when you talk with the farmers."

“Ye are different when ye gather herbs, but how am I different?”

“I’m not sure exactly. At Duncurra you are every inch the laird and military leader. You are firm and decisive. You tolerate nothing less than absolute respect and your clansmen willingly give it.”

“Of course they do. I always consider the needs of the clan first. My clan knows my decisions reflect that, so I have earned their respect. Was it not so at Cotharach?”

“Do you really need to ask that question? My uncle thought of himself first in all things. My clan feared him, they didn’t respect him. He gave no thought at all to the farmers unless they didn’t produce enough to suit him. He told them what he wanted and punished them if they didn’t deliver. He certainly didn’t seek their opinions.”

“No matter how I may wish to demand it, nothing I say will make the rain fall or the sun shine.”

“Aye, that is true. However, it is more than that. Somehow here ye seem more open and receptive with them.”

“As ye pointed out, I am a warrior, not a farmer. These men have knowledge acquired through years of working the land. More than that, they have the knowledge passed down from their fathers and grandfathers, just as my father and Malcolm’s father trained me to be a warrior. I am still their laird.”

“No doubt. Still, not every leader has learned that lesson.”

“What lesson? How to talk to farmers? That’s not so very hard,” he jested.

She laughed, “Nay, when to seek information, and perhaps more importantly, listen to others.”

He sobered a bit. “Your uncle was not a leader, Katherine, he was a tyrant. I am sorry ye suffered so at his hand.”

“Thank you. It is true though that one can learn as much from a bad leader as a good one. Knowing what not to do has its value.”

“Never fear, my sweet lass, I am certain there will be occasions to learn what not to do from me as well.”

~ * ~

When they returned to the keep, Edna was full of questions about Katherine’s visit to the crofters.

“Honestly, Edna, I don’t think they liked me. I seemed to make them uncomfortable.”

“My lady, Highlanders are not always the most welcoming folks. It has been a long time since we have had a laird’s wife who paid any attention to the clan. Most of the farming families had precious little contact with Laird Alastair’s second wife, but give them time and they will come around.”

“How can ye be sure of that?”

“Lady Katherine, ye are kind and gracious and ye always manage

to insinuate yourself into things. Frankly, ye are hard not to like."

Katherine laughed. "Insinuate myself? What does that mean?"

"Ye think no one notices how ye slip your way seamlessly into situations? One minute ye are chatting away with someone who is working, and the next ye are working right alongside them."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Don't ye? Didn't I see ye scrubbing pots in the kitchen yesterday?"

Katherine waved her hand, dismissing the notion, "That was nothing. Bridie needed a little extra help, that's all."

"Ye find a way to give a 'little extra help' to everyone ye encounter. Of course, the fact that the laird is so taken with ye will help too."

"Why would that matter?"

"Lady Katherine, ordinary people marry for love but noblemen and women don't have that luxury. We know neither of ye chose this union. The fact that there is affection between ye is practically miraculous. I think ye have won his heart, my lady, and that is something the clan can be thankful for."

Katherine didn't argue but she clearly remembered Niall saying, *my heart was never part of this bargain*. Nevertheless, she did as Edna suggested. She gave the clan time, and continued to be herself.

~ * ~

On another visit, she and Niall arrived at one of the small farming communities. An elderly farmer told them his wife, Maire, had been ill.

Excusing herself, Katherine went into his cottage, where she found his wizened wife trying to sweep the floor. "Hello, Maire, I'm Lady Katherine."

The elderly woman made a couple of swipes with the broom and sat down for a moment to catch her breath. "I don't believe I've ever met ye, lass," she said between breaths, then she stood and tried again to sweep.

"Nay, I'm sure we have never met," said Katherine. Taking the broom from Maire, she said, "How about if you sit and have a chat with me while I sweep."

"Now, lass, I couldn't let ye do that."

"Oh, please, I would enjoy a chat and I have been sitting all day."

"Well, I won't say your help isn't appreciated. I've had trouble catching my breath all day."

"Have you now?" asked Katherine as she made quick work of sweeping the small cottage. "Has your breathing been bothering you for a while, or is it just today?"

"Ah, lass, I'm getting old. I suppose it has been getting harder for

me to do much for weeks, but now that ye ask, it has gotten worse these last few days."

After sweeping the dust into the hearth, Katherine put the broom away and said, "I know a bit about healing. Perhaps you wouldn't mind if I took a quick look. Maybe there is something I can do."

Maire chuckled and said, "Well, I don't think ye can turn back time. Now if there is a powder or a potion that will pep me up a bit, I'll give it a try."

Katherine knelt in front of her and found swelling that pitted to her touch in the old woman's ankles and lower legs. "Oh, my legs have been swelling up like that for a couple of weeks now," offered Maire.

Katherine put her ear to Maire's chest, hearing moist crackling sounds as she exhaled. "Well, Maire, I think there might be a few things we can do. First, I suspect you will be more comfortable if you take a bit of a rest with your legs up." With a little protest, she helped the woman into bed, elevating both her head and her feet with pillows. "I won't be a minute now—I just have to get something from outside." Popping out of the cottage, she found Turcuil standing in the yard, so she asked him for the dagger he wore on his belt. The confused giant of a man handed her his dagger without question and she proceeded to pry some dandelions from the ground nearby, getting as much of the root as possible.

Having done that, she carefully cut some nettles, gathering them with her plaid wrapped around her hand to protect her skin from the stinging hairs. Back in the cottage, the women chatted as Katherine prepared an infusion of the dandelion root, adding a little honey to sweeten it. She gave a mug to the old woman to drink. Then she put the nettles in a cauldron of water with onions and a bit of cold chicken she found. "It is rather late in the summer for nettles, so let them stew down well, otherwise they might be a bit tough."

"Now, lass, I thought ye had a potion or something for me. Were ye just making an excuse to cook my dinner?"

Katherine laughed. "Nay, Maire. You are holding on to a lot of water. You can see it there in your legs and that is what is making it hard for you to breathe. The dandelion root and the nettles will help you get rid of some of it. I am going to put the chamber pot here near your bed, so it is easy to reach."

Maire looked at her solemnly. "Och, lass, I've been on this earth long enough to know what's happening to me. I told ye, ye can't turn back time."

Katherine sat beside Maire, taking hold of her hand. "You are right. I can't turn time back, but these things will help make you more comfortable for a while. I've left some dandelion root there on the

table, I'm sure your husband can find more as you need it. You can tell him how I made it."

"Ye are a good lass. What did ye say your name was?"

Katherine chuckled and answered simply, "Katherine."

"Just Katherine, is it? Are ye the laird's Katherine?"

"Aye, Maire, I am the laird's Katherine."

"Well, ye are a good lass, Katherine MacIan. That lad's done well."

Katherine smiled at her, but before she could respond, someone knocked on the door. She opened it to find Turcuil looking for her. Turning back, she said, "It has been lovely visiting with you, Maire, but I think my husband is ready to go. Now, remember what I told you and keep your feet up as much as you can."

As Katherine rode away, she felt the sadness she always did when there is little to do for someone who is ill except make them more comfortable. She knew eventually the fluid building up would overcome the dear old woman, but in the meantime she would be able to breathe a bit easier. After that day, Katherine always traveled with her bag of medicinal supplies.

~*~

Not surprisingly, knowledge of her skill as a healer spread very quickly at Duncurra. The clan had several midwives, but only Alan's wife, Effie, had healing skills extending beyond stitching wounds. With eight children, Effie found it difficult to tend all the hurts and ills at Duncurra. It didn't take long for the MacIan clan to turn to Katherine when they needed her skills. She was always willing to spend a few minutes chatting with them, celebrating their joys, or listening to their problems, and doing whatever she could to help. In this way Katherine learned a lot about the clan and the clan learned more about her. Soon her compassion won over even those who had been suspicious and mistrustful of a Lowlander.

Occasionally, when someone on an outlying farm needed a skilled healer, Niall took Katherine there. However, for the most part, the clansmen and women sought Katherine out at the keep. As their laird's wife, she suspected they weren't completely comfortable asking her to come to them.

Late one morning, she sat in the great hall reviewing the account books with Hendry. Caolin, one of the women who worked in the kitchen, rushed in and said, "My lady, I beg your pardon. Please, I need your help. I tried to find Effie, but she is delivering a bairn."

"What's wrong?"

"Tis my sister's child, she is terribly ill. She is coughing so much she can barely breathe. Kara lives in the village. Can ye come?"

"Of course I'll come. Give me a minute to get my things. Hendry, can we finish this later?"

“Aye, my lady. I’ve been itching to go down to the lake and fish for a spell, anyway,” he said with a wink.

Katherine retrieved her bag of medicinal supplies before walking with Caolin to Kara’s cottage.

“Kara’s husband is one of the men-at-arms here and he is away on sentry duty,” Caolin explained as they walked. “Their four-year-old daughter Ailis is terribly ill—she can barely breathe. Lady Katherine, they lost a baby last winter to a fever. Kara is beside herself with worry.”

Caolin hadn’t exaggerated. When they arrived they found Kara in a panic and Ailis struggling to breathe between coughing fits. Katherine stepped in, calmly taking control. The smoke from burning rosemary filled the house. Many people believed it would ward off infection, but Katherine had found the smoke seemed to make things worse, particularly for coughing illnesses. She had Kara remove the burning herbs from the cottage, then opened the windows and doors to help clear the smoke.

While Ailis’ skin felt hot and her lips looked dry and cracked, Katherine didn’t think the little girl had a dangerously high fever. The things Katherine had found to be most helpful in relieving a serious cough were steam and getting the patient to drink plenty of fluids. She bade Caolin heat a kettle of water. In the meantime, she held the child upright on her lap, speaking to her in a soft, calm voice while supporting her during the coughing spells.

Once the water boiled, Katherine poured some in a bowl placed on the table. Then she had Kara sit with Ailis on her lap. She put a linen towel over their heads, covering the bowl and trapping some of the steam. She replaced the water in the bowl as needed to keep it steaming. The child’s breathing eased a bit, but she was still not out of the woods. Katherine knew she had to get some fluids into the wee lass, too, so she made a tisane of peppermint, chamomile, and lemon balm, sweetened slightly with honey. Even if it was just a spoonful at a time, she made sure Ailis drank as much as she could between coughing spasms. After several hours of spooning liquids into the lass, Ailis still hadn’t used the chamber pot.

As afternoon faded into evening, Katherine saw Kara’s exhaustion. Clearly another long night lay ahead for her, so Katherine insisted she rest. Caolin kept the water heating and Katherine continued to keep Ailis as calm as possible, encouraging her to breathe the steam and drink the tisane. As darkness fell, they heard a knock at the door. With her head under the towel with Ailis, Katherine couldn’t see who had arrived, but she heard Caolin’s gasp.

“Laird.”

Katherine slipped her head out from under the towel to see her

large, clearly angry husband filling the doorway.

"What's the matter?" Katherine asked, concerned.

"No one knew where ye were," he growled. His tone of voice caused Kara to awaken. Little Ailis began to tremble and Katherine felt warm moisture spread across her lap. At least that was a good sign.

"Mind your tone," shushed Katherine, "you're scaring the lass."

Niall arched an eyebrow and, if anything, his scowl darkened. Caolin and Kara both looked petrified.

"I don't understand why you are angry. Hendry knew I was coming here to care for the wee lass. She has been very ill."

"Did ye know Hendry was going fishing at the loch?" His voice sounded quiet and calm, but it covered barely controlled rage.

"Well, aye, I did know that," she admitted.

"So no one at the keep knew where ye were until he returned just now. Were ye trying to worry me?"

"Nay, of course not. Niall, I am sorry. I didn't leave the walls, so I didn't think it mattered."

"It does matter. Ye know there is always a guardsman in the castle. If ye leave for any reason I expect ye to tell him where ye are going."

"I didn't know that," she said meekly.

"What do ye mean, ye didn't know that? Is it not the same everywhere? Was it not that way at Cotharach?"

"There were guards, but no one cared where I went. We've been through this, Niall."

"Aye, we have and ye know I care where ye go, so I will make it clear for ye. When I am in the keep, ye don't leave without telling me, and when I'm not there, ye don't leave without telling a guardsman, even if you are just going to the village. If he thinks ye need an escort, he will arrange it. Do ye understand?"

"Aye, I understand. I don't understand why, but I understand what ye've asked."

"Ye truly don't understand why? By all the saints, Katherine, ye are my wife, that's why."

Katherine looked at the faces of the other women in the room. This obviously made sense to them, so she simply said, "Oh."

Niall shook his head in frustration. "Are ye still needed here?"

Katherine thought for a moment. Although Ailis still had coughing fits, they were less frequent and had eased a great deal. Also, the lass breathed much more easily between them now. Since she had obviously wet herself on Katherine's lap, the fluids seemed to be helping, too. Katherine knew she had done all she could do for now. "Nay, I think Kara and Caolin can handle it as long as they promise to send for me if something changes for the worse."

The women agreed. Katherine gave Ailis to her mother before leaving the cottage with Niall. They walked in silence for a few minutes. Finally Niall said, “Katherine, I am your husband and your laird. It is my duty to protect ye, but I can’t do that if I don’t even know where ye are. Do ye understand that?”

“Aye,” she said quietly.

“Do ye really?”

“I understand you need to know where I am, so you will know I’m safe.” She didn’t fully understand why. After the whole ‘don’t leave the walls without an escort’ incident she understood why he felt she needed protection outside the walls. Surely if she hadn’t gone outside the walls, she could only be inside the walls and therefore safe. However, it was a simple enough request. “I truly didn’t mean to worry you and I’ll try not to disappear again.”

“Try?” he questioned, lifting her chin to look into her eyes. “There is no ‘try.’ Don’t,” he commanded firmly. Looking at her as if seeing her for the first time, he said, “Ye are all wet.”

“I said you scared the lass.”

“That isn’t ...”

“Aye, it is.”

“I didn’t mean to scare the wee thing,” he said, feeling contrite.

“Och, don’t fash yerself, laddie,” she said in her best imitation of Bridie, “I’m sure she’s not the first, nor will she be the last lass whose knees ye cause to quiver.”

“Cheeky wench,” he said with a grin. “I’d make your knees quiver here and now, but ye need a bath.”

“That I do,” agreed Katherine. She laughed heartily and turned to walk with him to the keep. Given the lateness of the hour, it would be much easier to bathe in the kitchen, but she suspected Niall would object unless she gave him a persuasive argument. “Niall, it’s late, I think I’ll just bathe in the kitchen.”

“A bath can be brought up. Ye needn’t do that.”

“I was just thinking ye could get to the part of the evening where ye make my knees quiver much more quickly if I do.”

“Och, yer a bold one, Katherine MacIan,” he said with a salacious grin.

Katherine bathed in the kitchen that night.

Chapter 13

In August, the sentries reported another raid on the western border. Even though the clan's financial hardships had been resolved, Niall found the losses to theft insufferable. Frustrated and irritated, he discussed the problem in the great hall that evening with Diarmad, Alan, and Cairbre. Katherine worked on a tapestry, while Fingal played a game with Tomas near the hearth.

"How are we going to stop the greedy bastard? I would be insane to do more than retaliate with similar raids, but I can't sit back and let him rob me blind, either," Niall said.

"He seems to be targeting just us," said Cairbre. "There have been no reports of trouble with other bordering clans."

"He's not feuding with other clans," said Alan.

"He's not feuding with us, either," said Diarmad. "They've always been a prickly bunch, but that disagreement was resolved years ago.

"Apparently," said Alan, "no one told Tadhg."

"Malcolm thinks Matheson has a much bigger target than a few head of livestock," said Niall.

"What, Duncurra?" Fingal said.

"I have to agree with Malcolm. One way of ensuring the defeat of an opponent is to critically weaken him first," Niall explained.

"Well, that would be true if a few sheep would critically weaken ye, and it could have in the spring, but not now. Even if that was his intention, it no longer makes sense," Fingal rationalized.

"There's no chance Matheson doesn't know about the wedding?" asked Cairbre.

"I don't think there is a soul in the Highlands who doesn't know about the wedding," scoffed Diarmad.

"Is it possible the greedy bastard just enjoys pilfering our sheep?" Alan asked.

"I don't think so. These facts don't add up," said Fingal. "I know Tadhg Matheson better than any of ye do. He trained with Laird Chisholm when I was there. He is not stupid, and, to be frank, he never struck me as greedy, either."

"Men change, Fingal," scoffed Niall.

Fingal didn't argue with him, but the look on his face clearly told Niall he disagreed.

"Will we raid Matheson again to recover our loss?" asked Diarmad.

Niall considered things for a few moments and said, "I think not. Maybe if I don't retaliate he will stop. If he raids again, we will know he is after a bigger target, as Malcolm suggests."

~ * ~

Summer waned, and Duncurra brought in a bountiful harvest. The long days began to shorten, growing cold. In October, Matheson raided yet again. Niall rode out the next morning with Diarmad, Cairbre, and several other men to see the site of the raid. He had not returned by early afternoon. Fingal, too, was away from the keep, having left the previous day to lead a contingent of men to Inverness for supplies. It would be several days before he returned.

Katherine worked hard to prepare the household for the long frigid winter to come, when an unexpected chill arrived. Late on that frosty afternoon, the watch announced MacLennan riders approached. Katherine knew Niall would want Malcolm and his party to be welcomed, so she had rooms readied. She also informed Bridie there would be guests for dinner.

Malcolm arrived accompanied by an older woman with dark hair and dark eyes who was both a little taller and heavier than Katherine. She wore a dark green woolen mantle over a wine colored velvet gown and a gold kirtle that appeared to be made of silk.

Malcolm greeted Katherine heartily, taking both her hands in his and kissing her on the cheeks. “Katherine, ye are looking very well.” Malcolm smiled. He gave her an appraising look and added, “Ye seem to be adapting nicely to the Highlands.”

“Thank ye. It is very good to see ye again, Laird MacLennan,” Katherine replied.

“Lady Eithne MacIan, I would like to introduce ye to Niall’s wife, Katherine, Katherine, this is Lady Eithne MacIan, the late laird’s wife,” said Malcolm.

Katherine had learned little more about Eithne than Niall had told her that evening at Brathanead. Katherine was under the impression neither of her sons felt particularly close to her. Also, she had heard hints Eithne may have played some role in the MacIan’s financial problems. No one seemed to think Eithne would ever leave Edinburgh, so Katherine certainly had not expected ever to greet her in Duncurra’s great hall.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Eithne. Welcome. Please, come warm yourselves by the hearth and have some refreshment,” Katherine said.

Eithne leveled a haughty stare at Katherine. “Katherine, dear, I have heard so much about you. I assumed, as you were a noblewoman from the Lowlands, you would have received proper training in decorum, but evidently not. You will address me as Lady MacIan, and it is unseemly for you to welcome me to my hall.”

Eithne’s insults momentarily stunned Katherine. Over the last few months it had not been necessary to hide her emotions, but she had not buried those skills very deeply. She immediately adopted her long-

practiced, unemotional demeanor. “I beg your pardon, Lady MacIan.”

Eithne sauntered into the hall and began giving orders. Eithne’s stiff posture and clear dismissal told her her stepmother-in-law expected a stronger reaction, but Katherine knew this game and played it well. When Edna looked to her lady for a signal as to whether she should do Eithne’s bidding, Katherine gave her the slightest nod. As Alastair’s widow and Niall’s stepmother, by all rights Eithne held the title of “Lady MacIan.” Therefore, unless Niall said otherwise, she could issue orders at Duncurra. Everyone spent the rest of the afternoon trying to meet Lady MacIan’s demands.

Eithne responded to their efforts by criticizing, correcting, or otherwise throwing barbs, primarily at Katherine, who had spent years honing the skills needed to handle Eithne, but the younger woman worried her clanswomen would be hurt. She did her best to be polite, doing everything she could to please her husband’s stepmother. Although he didn’t rush to her defense, occasionally, Laird MacLennan offered a mild chastisement. “Now, now, Eithne, don’t ye think ye are being rather harsh with Katherine?”

He did step in firmly when Eithne ordered the staff to remove Katherine and Niall’s things from the laird’s chamber so she could reside there for the duration of her stay. “I’m not sure that is wise, my lady,” Malcolm murmured. “Niall is laird here.”

“I suppose you are right,” said Eithne, her eyes filling with tears. “My dear Alastair is gone and that chamber will be filled with too many memories. You can put my things in the room next to it. Malcolm, my old friend, it would give me such comfort to know you are near. You should occupy the other chamber on the second floor.” As quickly as they had started, her tears stopped. “See to it, Katherine,” she said imperiously, waving her away.

Tomas occupied the room next to theirs, but Katherine did not protest. She helped Fineen move his things into the laird’s chamber for the moment, but she still worried. Everything in her screamed that Eithne was a feminine version of her Uncle Ambrose. Her instincts told her to keep Tomas away from her guest, at least until Niall came home. “Fineen, I need you to do something. Please go find Tomas—I think he is in the stables playing with Nevan. See if he can stay with Effie or Shona for a while this evening. You can tell them I will send for him later.”

Fineen nodded and left.

Katherine returned to the great hall and informed Lady MacIan and Laird MacLennan their rooms had been prepared.

“Well, I should hope so,” said Eithne, “and my bath is ready?”

“Nay, my lady,” Katherine said, “I was unaware you wanted one.”

“Katherine, are you so simple minded that you must be instructed

in common courtesy? Doesn't every weary traveler deserve a hot bath? It is a good thing I am here. I fear my home will become a Highland hovel under your tender care."

Eithne stood to leave and called to Edna, "Send up a bath. Now!" Turning back to Katherine she added, "We will have our evening meal when I return to the great hall. You will be dressed in proper attire and that rag will be removed from your head, or you will not dine at my table."

Eithne looked delighted when Katherine snapped, "My lady, I was under the impression you were a Chisholm and thus a Highlander, so you will understand why I will not remove my kertch."

Eithne slapped her so forcefully Katherine's head swung to the side and she tasted blood. She heard shocked gasps from everyone in the hall.

"How dare you address me in that manner?" screeched Eithne. "You will do as I say or you will not eat." She strutted from the room, heading to the tower looking happier than she had all afternoon.

Malcolm, too, rose to leave, chiding the younger woman. "Lass, Niall will be very disappointed to learn of the disrespect you have shown to his mother."

~ * ~

After Niall chose not to retaliate for the last raid, Matheson had sent a clear message by escalating this one. Not only did he steal sixteen head of sheep, but he torched several haystacks. They searched the area west of where the raid occurred, but the trail stopped shortly after they crossed onto Matheson land. "Fine," said Niall. "If Matheson wants this feud, by God, I will give it to him. We raid tonight and I want every one of those animals replaced."

Niall sent a rider back to Duncurra just before dark, instructing him to tell Alan the situation. "Will I deliver the same message to Lady Katherine?"

"Nay, she will worry. Just tell her we have decided to do some hunting and will return tomorrow." Well, it was true, really, he consoled himself. He was simply hunting another man's sheep.

~ * ~

Katherine glanced around the great hall: the servants appeared transfixed. After Laird MacLennan and Lady MacIan left, they rushed to Katherine, but she put up her hand and shook her head slightly. "Please attend to the tasks you have been given." Many of the MacLennan soldiers who rode escort were lounging in the hall. She worried they would interpret any sign of support for her from the Duncurra staff as disloyalty and report it to Lady MacIan.

At the moment she was most concerned about Tomas. Just as Uncle Ambrose had, she suspected Lady Eithne would instantly

identify him as Katherine's most profound weakness. However, she was confident Niall would sort things out as soon as he returned. That thought had barely formed when she learned he would not be home that night. Very few things kept him away from the keep overnight, but it did occur occasionally. Still, of all nights, she wished it didn't have to be this one. She had hoped to finalize plans for the evening meal and send her regrets to Lady MacIan without defying her order, but now she had to explain Niall's absence as well.

Katherine had to get through this evening as best she could on her own. She needed to get Tomas back to the keep and tucked away as soon as possible. She found Edna to discuss her concerns. Edna agreed. "Don't worry, I will see to him. I'll send Maura for him and he can stay with us tonight." Maura, Edna's daughter, was a bright, responsible girl of four and ten, so Katherine nodded her assent.

"Edna, please let me know when he is safe."

~ * ~

The evening meal was nearly ready when Maura returned with Tomas. Katherine stepped into the west tower so the MacLennans wouldn't see her and kissed him good night, saying, "Tomas, I want you to stay with Edna tonight. Tomorrow, I want you to stay here in the west tower with Maura and Nevan until your da comes home. Do you understand?"

"Aye, Mama."

Feeling slightly relieved now, she went to the kitchen, where she found Bridie livid. "Lass, that witch cannae treat ye like this. She has no right to lay a hand on ye. The laird won't stand for it, I tell ye."

"Bridie, please, don't give her a reason to target you, I couldn't bear it. Let's just keep her ire focused on me until the laird returns tomorrow."

"Target me? Lass, what are ye talking about?"

"Bridie, Lady MacIan is like my uncle. I can protect myself, but if she thinks anyone here will stand up to her for me, she will retaliate against them to strike at me. Please ignore anything she says to me. I'm going to take some bread and cheese to my chamber and try to avoid her this evening."

Bridie continued to steam, but said no more.

When Katherine returned to the great hall, Lady Eithne and Laird MacLennan were already seated at the laird's table, with Eithne in Niall's place. Katherine approached and Eithne spat, "I told you to dress appropriately and to remove that rag from your head. Do you defy me? You may wear a proper veil if you feel the need, but you won't sit at my table looking like a common born Highlander."

"Eithne," Malcolm said in a disapproving tone.

Common? There was only one common born Highlander in this

conversation and it wasn't Katherine. She knew better than to react. She knew not to take the bait. She had slipped earlier but she would not do it again. She took a deep breath and replied calmly, "I beg your pardon, Lady MacIan. It is not a question of defying you. I do not have more appropriate clothes than these. I only wish to inform you and Laird MacLennan that my husband has been detained and will not return to Duncurra until tomorrow. I do not wish to offend you any longer with my presence, so please excuse me."

"Well, dear," said Eithne, rising from the table, "if it is only a matter of you not having other clothes, I will be happy to loan you something. Come with me," Eithne commanded, reaching forward and snatching the kertch off Katherine's head, taking with it the last of Katherine's self-control.

Katherine grabbed the kertch out of her hand. "I am sorry, perhaps you misunderstood me. It isn't that I don't have other clothes. I consider these to be my most appropriate garments. Good night, my lady, Laird," she said, giving a nod to each of them before turning to leave.

"Stop!" commanded Eithne. "What is that you have in your hand?"

Katherine looked down to see the bread and cheese crushed in her left hand and turned back to her saying, "It is bread and cheese, my lady."

Eithne smirked, "I am sorry, perhaps you misunderstood me. When I said if you didn't dress properly you would not eat, I didn't mean just at this table."

"As you wish, my lady," Katherine said, shrugging. Resisting the urge to throw it at her, she put the food down on the nearest trestle table and, with supreme control, walked toward the east tower.

"Perhaps hunger will make you more agreeable in the morning," Eithne called.

"I doubt it, my lady," Katherine answered and ducked out the door.

~ * ~

Niall and his men had a successful raid. They stole a score of sheep. Niall decided to take a few extras rather than burning anything. When his men had secured the sheep well clear of the area, Niall pounded on the door of a farmer's cottage. The old farmer looked terrified by the furious warrior, but Niall did not intend to harm him. He said, "I am Laird MacIan and I want ye to give your laird a message from me."

"A—A—aye, Laird," the old man stammered.

"Tell him to stay the hell off my land!" Niall roared.

Chapter 14

"Stay off his land? What in the hell is he talking about?" Tadhg Matheson demanded furiously. He had barely finished breaking his fast when Hamish, one of his commanders, reported to him about the raid and MacIan's message. "Was anyone harmed?" he asked.

"He scared the wits out of old Angus, but nothing else, Laird."

"Hamish, I consider myself to be a reasonable man, wouldn't ye agree?"

Hamish chuckled. "As reasonable as they come, Laird."

"Last winter was a hard one, and ye know as well as I do Alastair MacIan had huge debts in Edinburgh, so when a few of my sheep walked away, did I grumble?"

"Now, Laird, would ye be asking me to lie?"

"Fine, I grumbled, but I didn't retaliate. I wasn't going to be the reason his clan starved."

"Exceedingly generous, Laird."

"Let's not go straight to 'generous,' at least not where the MacIans are concerned. I'll stick with 'reasonable'," Tadhg said dryly.

"Exceedingly reasonable, Laird." Hamish laughed.

"So, Alastair died, the MacIan debt was more profound than anyone imagined, and I ignored it when a few more head of sheep and cattle wandered across my border. Then Niall MacIan managed to marry one of the wealthiest heiresses in Scotland."

"As I hear tell, much to everyone's surprise, she is one of the bonniest as well."

"Rich and bonny, a lass after my own heart," sighed Tadhg. "So now MacIan has recovered financially and has a bonny wife to warm his bed. Why is he still raiding Matheson land and at the same time threatening me to stay off his? Hamish, I have grown tired of being reasonable. This time, we will retaliate."

"Tonight?" asked Hamish eagerly.

"Nay. Let's let Laird MacIan enjoy his success and feed my sheep for a couple of weeks before fetching them home."

~ * ~

Bone weary when he rode with his men to Duncurra late that morning, Niall wanted nothing more than his sweet wife and his warm bed. He knew something was wrong when Alan rode out to meet him. "What has happened? Is it Katherine? Tomas?"

"Laird, it's nothing like that. Malcolm MacLennan has arrived with Lady Eithne."

Niall gave a huge sigh of relief. "Is that all? Did ye think ye needed to meet me with that news? My mother, while unexpected, is only a minor irritation."

“I beg your pardon, Laird, but I’m thinking she may be more than a minor irritation. I understand your mother has claimed her right as Lady MacIan, taken over Duncurra, and sent your wife to bed last night without supper.”

Niall swore and kicked his horse into a gallop, not stopping until he reached the keep. Giving his horse over to a stable hand, he strode into the keep in a black fury. Eithne sat chatting with Malcolm at his table in his chair, but he didn’t see any sign of Katherine.

“Mother, this is a surprise,” said Niall, trying to tamp down his rage.

“Well, darling, I don’t see why it would be. You didn’t give me nearly enough money to live on in Edinburgh, so there is nowhere else I can go. Malcolm was visiting the royal court and agreed to escort me home.”

“Home?” Niall snorted in disgust. “Mother, I gave ye a larger stipend than ye deserved, considering how close ye came to ruining us. Ye had more than enough for a comfortable life. Where is my wife?”

Eithne pouted and tears welled up in her eyes, “You are being deliberately cruel. Your father would be so ashamed of the way you treat me.”

“I see to the welfare of my father’s clan, which is significantly more than ye did. Where is my wife?” he ground out through gritted teeth.

“As I warned you, son, that girl is totally unacceptable. She is unskilled, willful, and rude. You really must do something about her. She boldly defied me last night, in front of my clan. I told her perhaps going to bed hungry would sweeten her mood, and she stomped off. I have never been so embarrassed, so humiliated. Not that I care as long as I don’t have to suffer her distasteful company, but I believe you will find her in your chamber.”

Niall headed for the tower stairs, taking them two at a time. Reaching his chamber, Niall threw the door open and demanded, “What did ye do?”

~ * ~

Katherine, who sat by a cold hearth sewing, responded with disbelief, “What did I do?”

“Ye know what I mean,” said Niall crossly. “What happened?”

Katherine told herself to stay calm. She shook her head slightly. “Niall, please don’t be angry until you have heard the whole story.”

“Katherine, my mother is a mean-spirited, bitter woman. I know this—everyone does. But by all that’s holy, were ye unable to keep the peace for one day?”

Katherine’s heart sank. Without knowing any of the facts, he was

blaming her. In spite of assuring her he would make an effort not to assume the worst, he had done exactly that. She remembered the day in the glen when he said, *I am a very flawed man, and set in my ways. It may take a few tries before I get the knack of it.* Still, she believed once he heard the story he would understand.

"Damn it, Katherine, answer me!"

"Where shall I start?" asked Katherine, looking down.

"Start with why my mother says ye defied her in front of clansmen," Niall answered. "You remember the definition, don't you? Willful disobedience?"

Katherine remembered Malcolm's warning: Niall will be very disappointed to learn of the disrespect ye have shown to his mother.

Katherine sighed. "Your mother was retiring to her chamber for a bath. She said she wanted the evening meal ready when she returned and I should be dressed properly without—without my kertch on, or I would not dine at her table. I told her I understood she was a Chisholm and, as a Highlander herself, I hoped she would appreciate why I couldn't do that. Then she—she—"

"She became angry, ye were too hard-headed to give in, and decided to go to bed hungry instead. Why couldn't ye have just appeased her and changed your clothes? What were ye wearing, anyway?"

"I was wearing this," she said, pointing to the Highland clothes she wore.

"Is that when ye 'stomped off to bed?"

"Nay," she said miserably. "When she came downstairs and I hadn't changed, she asked me why I defied her. I said I did not intend to defy her, but I did not have more appropriate clothes."

"But ye do have other clothes. Ye have the Lowland gowns ye brought with ye."

"Niall, that's not the point. A gown is not more appropriate than what I am wearing. Anyway, that's essentially what I told your mother, and she told me to leave, so I did."

He shook his head and said, "Nay, Katherine, the point is, like it or not, and believe me I don't like it, when Eithne is in residence, she is Lady MacIan. Ye defied her in front of clansmen, which I will not tolerate. Are you going to try to convince me your behavior was not willful this time?"

"Nay, Niall, but—"

"No arguments. Put on a gown, come downstairs, and apologize, so we can restore some semblance of peace."

"Niall, I haven't told you everything," she tried to explain.

"I've heard enough. Ye were childish and disrespectful. Ye will make amends."

“But what about my kertch?”

“Leave it off.”

“How can you ask me to do that? Shall I take off my wedding band, too? You’re a Highlander; you know what it means.”

“But ye aren’t a Highlander!” Niall yelled at her.

That stung worse than Uncle Ambrose’s whip ever had.

“Nay. I was just forced to marry one who always seems to believe the worst of me, to give him my wealth, to live in the Highlands with him, and to help care for his clan. You’re right. I’m not a Highlander, how silly of me to think that,” she snapped at him.

“Not. Another. Word.” Niall looked furious. “I’ve had enough misery from that woman to last several lifetimes, and I will not have ye adding to it. Ye will placate her until she leaves. Change your clothes. Now!” Niall roared as he left the room.

Katherine felt crushed. She put her sewing away, removed her kertch, and changed her clothes. With rigid determination, she forced back her tears before descending to the great hall. She could tell by the looks of pity she received from the Duncurra staff that they had heard Niall shouting at her, telling her she wasn’t a Highlander. They looked as shocked as she felt.

Niall stood with his back to the room, staring into the hearth. She approached the table where Eithne sat gloating. Adopting her mask of indifference, with her head bowed Katherine said, “My lady, I apologize for defying you in front of your clansmen last night. Please forgive me.”

“Well, I was appalled and insulted by your behavior. See that it doesn’t happen again.”

“Yes, my lady. Please excuse me now, there is work I must do.” Eithne waved her away arrogantly. Katherine glanced at where Niall stood with his back still turned to her and, with her heart breaking, she escaped to the kitchen. There she found Bridie sobbing in Edna’s arms.

Chapter 15

Niall introduced Tomas as their foster son that evening. Exactly as he expected, Eithne looked as if she had just smelled an exceedingly bad odor. Katherine had been right to shield Tomas until he returned. Malcolm's cool reaction surprised him a little, and Niall got the impression he disapproved as well. However, Tomas had been the child of a peasant, and Malcolm and Eithne had spent enough time at court to be overly class conscious. He knew it would be best to limit Tomas' contact with both of them.

Niall remembered vividly how Eithne had expressed her displeasure with him when he was little. Initially subtle, she would give him a hard pinch or a thump on the head. As he grew older, she slapped him or took a leather strap to his hands or legs. Niall believed if she felt perfectly comfortable treating her stepson and even her own son in that manner, she would have no compunction about doing the same to his foster son. One of his guardsmen would be assigned to stay with Tomas at all times.

~ * ~

Katherine chastised herself repeatedly. She knew how to protect herself from the likes of Eithne and was a master at controlling her anger and hiding her emotions. She had become complacent. Whatever gave her the idea she could have principles, much less stand on them? She became Katherine Ruthven once more, remaining quiet and calm, keeping her eyes downcast, and doing everything Eithne asked of her.

Having had no sleep the night before because of the raid, Niall looked exhausted by nightfall. After the evening meal, Katherine excused herself to put Tomas to bed. Niall, too, offered his apologies and followed Katherine and Tomas out of the hall. When they reached the second floor, Niall made to open the door to Tomas' room and Katherine stayed him. "Your mother is staying in that room. I've moved Tomas' things out for now."

"Why did ye do that? She could have stayed in the other one."

Katherine said pointedly, "Niall, Lady MacIan required this room for herself and the other one for Laird MacLennan. I put Tomas' things in our room for now."

"Fine," he said irritably, going to their chamber. He looked angry and Katherine suspected he wanted to be alone with her, but it couldn't be helped. She made a pallet for Tomas on the floor and slipped into bed wearing her shift.

"Are ye sleeping in that?" he asked angrily.

Katherine sighed. "What would ye have me do, with Tomas sleeping in the room?"

Niall growled, “Ye will find somewhere else for him tomorrow.

~ * ~

When Fingal returned the next day, and Keith filled him in on the events of the past few days, he became furious. “He did what?” Fingal roared. “He let that bitch get to him!”

He was not going to let this slide. Fingal put a lid on his temper and sought out his brother, who was overseeing some repairs to the defensive wall. “Niall, can we talk?”

“Leave it, Fingal,” Niall warned.

With barely controlled anger, Fingal said, “Ye are my laird, and I would not show disrespect to ye, but ye are also my brother and that is who I want to talk to. Will ye talk with me privately?”

“Fingal, as your laird I am telling ye this is not a good day to talk to your brother.”

Fingal tried one last time, speaking very low. “Niall, she is my mother and that is only by sad chance. She has never been a real mother to either of us. She doesn’t have the capacity to love anyone but herself, and still ye give her free rein over your clan. Ye have a wife who has given ye her heart, and yet ye are letting the same woman who destroyed ye destroy her as well.”

“Fingal, I warned ye. Ye are crossing the line. Ye will not tell me how to treat our mother, this clan, or my wife. I am your brother, and because of that I am not going to call ye out on this, but if ye raise the subject with me again, particularly if ye make any comment about my wife, ye will pay the price. Do I make myself clear?”

With gritted teeth, Fingal answered, “Aye, Laird. Ye have made yourself clear.” He bowed and left, feeling frustrated and having nowhere to vent his anger.

~ * ~

For the next several days Niall had the peace he sought, but the strain nearly killed him. Eithne ruled Duncurra and he stayed away. Niall thought perhaps the tension was getting under Malcolm’s skin as well because he returned home, but Lady MacIan begged him to come for Christmas and he agreed. Because of that, Eithne refused to allow Katherine to put Tomas in “Laird MacLennan’s” room. Katherine put him in an empty chamber on the third floor, but Fingal woke most mornings to find his nephew on the floor of his room.

Each evening Katherine took Tomas to bed immediately after the meal. On the first two nights, Niall found her asleep beside the boy and he carried her to their chamber without waking her. The third night he wanted her so badly he ached. He laid her on the bed and undressed her, kissing and caressing her bare skin as he went. In her state of half-sleep, she responded to him instinctively. A little moan of pleasure escaped her lips as he continued the delicate assault. As she

woke more fully, she returned his caresses and seemed to join with him willingly, but without the joyous abandon he found so erotic. Afterwards, Niall held her close, breathing in the clean scent of her, and feeling as if he had lost something.

~ * ~

She lay in his arms until she thought he had gone to sleep, then slipped out of bed. She put on a shift, wrapped an *airisaidh* around her shoulders, and sat on the floor near the hearth, resting her head on her knees as she stared into the fire.

"What are ye doing?" he asked.

"I thought you were asleep. I am cold."

"Katherine, come back to bed. I will keep ye warm."

"I just want to sit here close to the fire for a minute. I will come back to bed soon."

"Come now." He sounded irritated.

She hadn't shed a tear since Eithne arrived days earlier. She had held herself together with her forced calm and it had been grueling. She wanted to please Niall, but he allowed Eithne to run rough-shod over his clan. She didn't want these people, whom she had learned to care for, to suffer Eithne's malice, but she didn't know what to do about it. Right now, more than anything in the world, she just needed to cry.

"Niall, please, please let me be. Please, go to sleep. I will come back to bed soon. Please..." she was trembling.

"Enough, Katherine. Come to bed now," he demanded.

"Nay," she said. "Your quiet biddable wife will be back in the morning, I promise. I just—please...." She turned her head away from him as the first hot tears slid down her cheeks. She stayed as still as she could, knowing a sob would give her away. *Please just go to sleep.*

"Are ye crying?"

"By all that is holy, Niall," her voice cracked, "even Tomas knows I don't like to be seen crying. Can't you please, just this once, please let me be?"

He was out of bed instantly. When he scooped her into his arms, she could no longer hold back the sobs.

"Wheesht, lass. Why are ye crying?"

She sobbed. "B—be—because—y—you're an idiot."

"What did ye say?" he asked, astonished.

"I said—I'm crying—because you're an idiot."

"That's what I thought ye said." He said nothing more, but held her while she cried. When her tears finally subsided, he asked, "Do ye want to tell me why I'm an idiot now?"

"Niall, after you saw how badly Uncle Ambrose beat me, you made me promise never to hide anything from you. Then, that day in

the glen, you said you would try not to assume the worst, but you have. The one time I needed you, I needed to talk to you and tell you something, you wouldn't listen. You ordered me to stop."

"Is this about the day my mother arrived?"

"Idiot," she said under her breath.

"Aye, that's been established," he said dryly, "and ye are right. Ye made me a promise and I made one to ye. I did warn ye it might take a few tries before I got the knack of it. Sweetling, I am sorry. I was tired and angry and I should have listened to you. Will ye tell me now?"

"Why bother?"

He tilted her chin up to look at her. "Because I asked you to."

Katherine shook her head in frustration, but launched into the whole story. She started with Eithne's chastisement for addressing her as "Lady Eithne." When she reached the point where Eithne scolded her for not having a bath prepared, Niall said reasonably, "But she hadn't asked for one."

"She called me simple-minded when I made that observation. That is when she told me to remove the rag from my head. I said I understood she was a Highlander and I knew she would appreciate why I didn't want to remove my kertch, and she slapped me. After that I was rude, and I should not have been, but—"

"She struck ye?" Niall's eyes grew dark.

"Aye but—"

"She struck my wife in the face? In front of clansmen?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you. That's why I hid Tomas. Niall, why wouldn't you listen? I swear I tried to keep the peace. I—" she couldn't hold back a sob.

"Wheesht," he said, carrying her back to bed. When the new wave of tears had quieted, he said, "Katherine, ye are right. I am an idiot."

The next morning when they rose, she started to put on a kirtle, but Niall shook his head, "Nay, Katherine, I was wrong." He handed her a *léine* and an *airisaidh*. "She was Lady MacIan, but I am laird now, and ye are my wife, the lady of this castle. He retrieved her kertch, and gave it to her. "In the future, I won't let anyone forget that."

"This isn't going to be pretty," Katherine said, tying her kertch on.

When they descended to the great hall, Eithne sat at the laird's table. "What's the meaning of this?" she spat when she saw Katherine's attire.

Niall answered, "Lady Eithne, there has been a mistake. Ye were my father's wife and ye are Lady MacIan." She smiled smugly. "However," Niall continued, "I am laird here now. Ye chose to leave this keep more than twelve years ago, and during that time ye managed to impoverish this clan."

Eithne opened her mouth to protest, but Niall put his hand up to silence her.

"Ye have given up the right to any authority at Duncurra. Ye are welcome to live here, or in Edinburgh, or anywhere else ye choose, on the allowance ye have been given, but Katherine is the lady of Duncurra. Ye will show her the respect she deserves as my wife, and which she has earned by caring for this clan."

Eithne appeared to burn with fury, but before she said anything, Niall added, "One more thing, Lady MacIan. If ye ever strike my wife again, I will banish ye."

Eithne stomped off to her chamber and did not emerge for the rest of the day.

Under Bridie's strenuous objections, Katherine did have the evening meal sent up.

Once again Duncurra ran smoothly, but with Eithne in residence, things were not always pleasant. Katherine continued to find herself in the role of protector as she had been at Cotharach. Although she had the authority to prevent some of Eithne's punitive behavior, she had no power to curb her acid tongue. Lady MacIan continued to be an irritant to everyone who lived or worked at Duncurra, and the comfortable rhythm existing before her arrival was shattered.

Chapter 16

As the days grew shorter in early November, the Highlands became unusually cold and the winds howled from the northwest, occasionally bringing snow. Katherine envied Niall, who could stay away from the keep for most of the daylight hours, limiting his exposure to the ever-present Eithne. When she could leave the keep to visit an ailing villager, Katherine relished her time away, but it came at a price. On her return she faced disgruntled staff and an even more caustic than usual mother-in-law.

As Niall had instructed, and to Tomas' delight, each day a different guardsman had the responsibility of keeping the boy well clear of Eithne. Each of them had different talents, interests, and stories, so Tomas always had fresh entertainment. To Katherine's amusement, so did the rest of Duncurra. This was especially true on "Turcuil days," as Tomas called them. Turcuil could strike terror into the hearts of lesser men with a simple scowl, but Tomas adored him. On "Turcuil days" he learned to wrestle and spar with a wooden sword. He also rode all over Duncurra on the shoulders of a bear, or a dragon, or whatever beast Tomas wanted Turcuil to be.

This alone provided rich entertainment for those witnessing it, but the real show came when the weather was bad or some other reason forced them to stay in the keep. Katherine finally saw why Fingal first described him as a changling, because on those days it was impossible for Turcuil to avoid Edna. Fingal and Niall hadn't exaggerated. When Edna entered a room, Turcuil watched her like a smitten puppy, becoming absolutely tongue-tied if forced to speak to her. When she spoke to him, he turned several shades of red and mumbled or grunted something unintelligible.

After several "Turcuil days," Katherine realized the rest of the castle staff actually enjoyed the sport of "Turcuil baiting" and created opportunities to engage in it. One morning Katherine heard Bridie say, "Edna, I'm just taking some sweet buns out of the ovens. Go tell Turcuil to bring Tomas to the kitchen." But then Bridie followed her to the door of the great hall with a grin on her face, to watch the show. Katherine mistakenly thought his fellow guardsmen might have more sympathy for him, but if anything, they relished "Turcuil baiting" more than the castle staff. Whenever possible, the men created errands forcing Turcuil to cross paths with Edna simply for the sport of it.

It was obvious that everyone watching found the whole comedy even more amusing because while Turcuil clearly adored Edna, she seemed sublimely unaware of his affection for her. Perhaps because of this, Edna treated him with the same terse efficiency she did everyone

else, and the inexplicably shy giant could not push beyond her brusque demeanor.

Katherine supposed she really shouldn't interfere, but she liked both of them immensely. Not only did she hate to see Turcuil suffer, but she also believed Edna might welcome his affection if she knew about it. Edna had been a widow for a number of years, and even with two children and a castle full of people, Katherine frequently thought she seemed very lonely. Armed with this knowledge, the Lady decided to give the oblivious woman a little push if she had the chance to do so.

Such an occasion arose one day when Edna planned to visit the cooper. Seeing the opportunity, Katherine decided not to pass it up, so she went along, ostensibly for some fresh air and a walk. As they strode down the path, Katherine asked, "Edna, how long do ye plan to torture Turcuil?" knowing full well Edna did not recognize the effect she had on the guardsman. Still, Katherine had learned the element of surprise had value in any battle.

"Turcuil? What—what are ye talking about?"

"Turcuil. Ye know, the great bear of a guardsman."

"I know who Turcuil is, my lady," she said in exasperation. "Why do you think I am torturing him?"

"I don't know why ye are torturing him, that's why I asked ye."

"Nay, that's not what I meant and ye know it. I am not torturing Turcuil, as if anybody could. What makes ye think I am?"

Katherine stopped and looked her in the eye. "Ye needn't be coy with me. Ye can't have missed it. Anyone with eyes can see that man is mad about ye. I am just wondering how long ye plan to lead him along like a bull with a ring in his nose."

"My lady," gasped Edna. "I have never—surely you don't think that I—why would—he what?"

"He is mad about ye. He absolutely adores ye. He can't take his eyes off ye. If ye so much as twitched your little finger in his direction, he would fall at your feet."

"My lady, ye are mistaken," Edna said, blushing profusely. "The oaf rarely even speaks to me except for the occasional grunt."

"He can barely form thoughts in your presence, much less words."

"Well," said Edna indignantly, "that hardly bodes well for getting to know him better, does it?"

Katherine laughed heartily. "And why should the course of true love run any smoother for ye than for the rest of us? A strong man who adores ye can learn to talk to ye with a little encouragement."

"But—my lady, are ye certain? Turcuil?"

Katherine smiled and said confidently, "I am more certain of Turcuil's affection for ye than I am of the sun rising on the morrow.

Mind ye, I certainly would understand if ye aren't interested in the man. He has his faults, and trying to get through to him would be a challenge."

Suddenly indignant, Edna said, "Now what on earth would make ye say that? Turcuil is a fine man whom any woman would be lucky to have." She stopped her tirade when she registered the small sly smile on Lady Katherine's face. She blushed again, laughed, and said, "Ye are a wicked lass."

"I'm nothing of the sort," replied Katherine, even as her mouth split into a very wicked grin and she continued walking toward the village.

"Well, my lady, since ye are so very certain of his affections, how do ye propose I—uh—encourage him?"

Now Katherine blushed. "Are ye honestly asking me that question? I'm hardly the expert at capturing a man's heart. Have ye forgotten the king had to force a man to marry me? Nay, I'm just showing you where the road is. Ye'll have to find the way on your own."

"It seems to me, having captured the heart of a hard-headed man who was, as ye say, forced to marry ye, ye might be able to share some wisdom, my lady."

Katherine smiled sadly. "Edna, I believe the laird has grown fond of me, as I have of him, but he said himself his heart was never part of the bargain. It is different for ye and Turcuil, because Turcuil is prepared to offer ye his heart."

"Fond, my lady? Ye and the laird have grown fond of each other? What was it ye said to me, 'Anyone with eyes can see?' Well, anyone with eyes can see there is more than fondness between the two of ye."

Katherine wished it were true and couldn't keep the sadness out of her voice. "I think ye are mistaken."

They had reached the cooper's workshop and Edna said, "With all due respect, my lady, I think *ye* are mistaken. Ye have captured the laird's heart as securely as he has captured yours."

Katherine looked doubtfully at her and Edna added, "I am surer of that than I am of the sun rising on the morrow."

Katherine laughed as she realized how happy Edna's words made her. If Edna could tell Katherine loved Niall, perhaps Niall was growing to love her as well.

~ * ~

That evening, after her chat with Edna, the older woman appeared to pay closer attention to Turcuil. When he entered the great hall for the evening meal, Edna wished him a good evening and asked if he would go with her to fetch a keg of ale from a storeroom. He became even more flustered than ever and blushed crimson, but as he

followed her to the storeroom, Katherine noticed the small knowing smile on Edna's face.

Later, when she and Niall had retired to their bedchamber, Niall said with a sly grin, "I think Edna has finally taken notice of Turcuil. I didn't think that would ever happen."

Katherine stopped combing her hair. She turned to look at him. "I have to confess, I, too, was convinced it wouldn't happen, so I gave Edna a little push."

"Katherine, what did ye do?" Niall asked, the grin on his face belying his severe tone of voice.

"Nothing that shouldn't have been done ages ago. Although it was plainly obvious to everyone else, Edna herself was completely oblivious to Turcuil's affections. I just pointed that out to her."

"Wife, I am not sure ye should be interfering in the love lives of my men."

"Well, that isn't what I did, is it? Not unless you have recently made Edna a guardsman? I simply shed some light on the situation for her. What she chose to do with that newly found knowledge was completely up to her."

Niall snorted. "Turcuil has no chance now."

Katherine glared at him. "How long would ye like to continue this little offended act, Laird? Ye are sadly mistaken if ye think I don't know ye yourself have been—what was the word you used? Interfering? Yes that was it—ye yourself have been 'interfering' in Turcuil's love life for weeks now."

At the look of shocked indignation on Niall's face, Katherine arched an eyebrow. "Tell me ye have not assigned Turcuil to Tomas twice as often as any other guardsman."

Niall still tried to feign innocence. "Have I? I was unaware."

"Unaware, were ye? And I suppose ye were also 'unaware' Turcuil is the only guardsman assigned to Tomas when the weather is bad?"

Niall had the good grace to smile and look guilty.

"I thought so," said Katherine smugly. "Well, sir, ye should realize even if ye toss the right ingredients into a pot and stir, it doesn't become soup without adding some heat."

Niall grinned, pulling her into his embrace, "I'll give ye some heat, my impudent little matchmaker."

Chapter 17

By the end of November, winter's icy grip firmly held Duncurra. Unusually cold, even for the Highlands, Katherine found fewer valid reasons for escaping the keep, thus having to tolerate Eithne's company for longer periods of time. Even though Niall had clearly assigned all authority to Katherine, she still tried her best to be gracious and to show Eithne a reasonable amount of respect. Some days she found the effort required to do this simply exhausting.

On one snowy afternoon after attending to all other tasks that could possibly keep her out of the great hall, Katherine finally had to tackle some needlework she had been avoiding. As she sat sewing by the hearth, she listened to Eithne criticize and complain for what seemed like hours. Katherine hadn't been well for a couple of days. She felt more tired and less patient than usual. She could barely tolerate the forced confinement with her mother-in-law. As Eithne railed on at her, Katherine thought time spent with the unpleasant woman must surely rival purgatory. God must have given her this penance for some reason, but she couldn't imagine what horrible sin she had committed to deserve it. Finally she stood up saying, "Pardon me, Eithne, I have to…go out."

"In this storm? Why, of all the idiotic things to do."

But Katherine had already left the great hall before Eithne could say more. Not taking time to fetch a heavy mantle, she pulled her *airisaidh* over her head, stepping outside the front doors of the keep. The snow fell heavily, blown by the biting wind, which easily penetrated her woolen garments. In her haste to leave, she forgot to inform a guardsman of her destination. She had no real idea where she was going anyway.

She stood on the steps for a moment, looking around, and her eyes landed on the chapel just across the courtyard. Perhaps she would find the peace she sought in the stillness there. She crossed the courtyard and slipped inside the little building, shutting the door behind her. With no fire to warm it, Katherine could see her breath in the frigid air, but without the biting wind she could tolerate the cold.

Sitting on one of the benches in the sparsely furnished chapel, she took a deep breath, inhaling the faint aroma of beeswax and incense that seemed to linger in every church. The tension she couldn't seem to escape in Eithne's presence slipped away, leaving her feeling calmer than she had in days. She missed this. She prayed quietly for a while. When she reached the end of her litany, she simply sat in the stillness, savoring the tranquility. She felt a holiness in simply being still that she couldn't quite explain, but of all days, today she needed the sacred silence. She wasn't sure how long she sat there, but a commotion

outside drew her from her contemplation and she went to see what was amiss.

"There she is," she heard Turcuil call, and then she saw her husband striding towards her.

"I thought ye were lost. Why didn't ye tell anyone where ye were going? Eithne said ye went out into the storm hours ago." Niall was cross but his voice held a note of fear.

"Well, that is a gross exaggeration," Katherine said, "and I didn't tell anybody because when I left the keep I didn't know where I was going. I just needed to escape and find a few moments of peace, but I am sorry I worried you."

"Ye are freezing," he said and, scooping her up, carried her across the snowy courtyard, into the keep, straight upstairs to their chamber. He stoked the fire in the hearth and asked, "If ye needed quiet, why didn't ye just come up here where it was warm?" He still sounded cross with her.

"There is a difference between quiet and peace. I have been tired and irritable lately. I used to go to Mass every day and I thought maybe a few minutes in the peaceful stillness of the chapel would help. That is the only thing I have ever missed about Cotharach."

He considered her a moment. "Would ye like to have a priest here, Katherine?"

"You mean a resident priest like Father James, not just an itinerant? Is that possible?"

"It can be arranged. Since ye are the reason we have adequate resources, the least I can do is give ye a priest if that is what ye want."

"If it really isn't a problem, I would like that very much." She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him.

~ * ~

The storm blew out during the night and the day dawned clear and bright. Niall sent a messenger with an appropriate offering to the Dominican abbey several hours ride away. It thrilled Katherine when the messenger returned the next day, accompanied by Father Colm. As big and strong as any warrior, only his priest's robes revealed his true calling. His crystal blue eyes sparkled with vitality, but his white hair and beard suggested he had at least three score years behind him.

Katherine had a room prepared for him in the east tower and he immediately became an important fixture at Duncurra. Although clearly a very spiritual man, he was warm and friendly, always more than willing to help with whatever work he could. This endeared him to the clan instantly, and it was common to see him lifting stones to mend a wall, or helping to repair a roof. If anyone hesitated to accept his help, he informed them he considered the work a "corporal act of mercy," and in failing to allow him to help them, they would deny

him the opportunity to perfect his soul. Coming from a priest, this argument sounded reasonable, and upon hearing it, the villagers nearly always accepted his help. Katherine suspected the old priest just liked to stay busy.

In the evenings Father Colm usually joined those gathered at the hearth, often telling stories that had everyone enthralled. On one of these evenings shortly after he arrived, Katherine finally learned why this gentle priest looked like a warrior. He was a warrior, or at least had been one before becoming a priest. In fact, he had been a mercenary, an extremely talented swordsman.

The youngest of five brothers, he had been an ambitious young man. He had sought wealth and glory with his sword arm. He hired himself out to whatever lord or baron would pay him the most. Travelling throughout England and France, soon he cared little about the nature of the duties assigned to him, as long as the purse that came with them was heavy enough. Because of his skill and reputation for ruthlessness, the purses became heavier and heavier.

"One day I found myself in the midst of a fierce and bloody battle. I had either forgotten the reason for the fight or never knew what it was in the first place. I was simply there to kill. I showed no mercy. In truth, my soul was empty—I had no mercy to show. I was covered in blood and gore, but none of it was my own. Opposing warriors lay dead all around me. I'm sure the stench of death permeated the air, but I didn't notice. My broad sword was raised over my head, prepared to cleave yet another warrior in two, when for some reason I hesitated. I truly believe God stayed my hand, for in that moment of hesitation, I realized it was not a warrior standing before me."

"Who was it?" asked Tomas, enthralled.

"It was just a scared lad, Tomas, a squire of no more than four and ten. His lord had fallen, he wore no armor, nor did he wield a weapon. In the moment I hesitated, he ran. I was horrified by what I had almost done. After that battle, I wondered how many faceless men, perhaps even boys, I had slaughtered for no other reason than to fill my own purse. Make no mistake, there are just wars. Certainly there is nobility in defending one's home or fighting an injustice, but there was nothing noble in what I was doing. That realization shattered me. I asked to be released and I came home to the Highlands.

"Once home, I realized simply walking away was not enough to soothe my conscience. My sins haunted me for years, but I found solace in faith. That is why I eventually became a priest. I used the riches I had acquired to help those in need."

"Can ye still wield a sword?" asked Tomas, rapt.

"Aye, lad, I can, but while I would if I had to in defense, I shall

never do so again for personal gain."

~ * ~

While she continued to feel ill and more tired than usual, Katherine loved being able to attend daily Mass once again. And she wasn't the only one. She learned Highlanders in general tended to be very devout, so the chapel was often full.

Edna, too, attended daily Mass, often with the giant Turcuil at her side. As conversation wasn't his strong suit, Katherine suspected Turcuil felt less self-conscious with Edna when in an environment where the only words he had to speak were the responses of the ancient liturgy.

As they neared the end of Advent, a time of prayer and fasting, Katherine threw herself into preparing for the feasts and celebrations of Christmas and the Epiphany. She ensured the entire keep was cleaned and decorated with holly, ivy, and bay. As he had promised, Laird MacLennan returned to Duncurra with a small retinue for the Christmas celebrations.

Katherine had mixed feelings about Laird MacLennan. Clearly both Niall and Fingal respected him, considering him part of the family. Yet when he had first arrived with Eithne, Katherine would have welcomed more support from him. However, when he arrived days before Christmas, charming and affable, she thought perhaps she had overreacted. Malcolm's presence brought one unexpected but welcome benefit—Eithne focused her full attention on entertaining him. This gave Katherine a much needed respite from her sniping. Soon she wondered why she had ever dreaded his arrival.

After the flurry of activity leading up to it, Christmas came reverently. Duncurra celebrated the three traditional Christmas Masses, the Angel's Mass at midnight, the Shepherd's Mass at dawn, and the Mass of the Divine Word later in the morning. Then, in the afternoon, the clan celebrated with a huge feast. It had been several years since the MacIans had sufficient resources to allow for a celebration like this, so they threw themselves into it whole-heartedly. After the feast, those assembled removed the trestle tables so the music and dancing could begin.

Katherine found the dancing captivating. As a member of the Scottish Lowland nobility, in her younger years she had learned formal courtly dances similar to those performed in England and France. However, the dances performed on this Christmas night were unique to the Highlands. She had never seen anything like them and she watched the beautiful, joyful dances with longing.

Shortly after the music started, Niall, perhaps noticing her wistful expression, took her hand. "Dance with me."

She felt acutely ashamed and without meeting his eyes, began to

stammer. “Niall—I—I can’t—I would love to—but I—I don’t know how.”

“Then ye shall learn,” he said, ignoring her embarrassment and pulling her into the center of the room. She was terrified, knowing she would humiliate them both, but he only grinned at her. “Katherine, relax, it isn’t that hard.”

As he guided her through the opening steps of the dance, she desperately tried to follow him. Astonished by how well her warrior husband could dance, Katherine felt even worse about her own lack of skill. When the pattern repeated, she found she had less trouble, until by the end of the dance, although not proficient, she felt more comfortable and was enjoying herself. When the dance was over, Niall pulled her into an embrace, kissing her, much to the delight of the other revelers. She stumbled through several more dances with him before begging him to have mercy on her. Breathing heavily, she retreated to her seat at the table.

With the courage coming from a few tankards of ale as well as the urging of his comrades, she watched Turcuil pluck up his nerve and ask Edna to dance with him. Until that moment, Katherine let herself believe her dance skills weren’t terrible for her first time, but she became acutely embarrassed again when she watched the giant of a man dance the sometimes intricate country dances with ease. Noticing her discomfit, Malcolm asked, “Lass, what has ye so distressed?”

Flushing even more deeply, Katherine answered, “It is a little embarrassing that every warrior in this room seems to be able to dance, while I stumble like a drunkard.”

Malcolm laughed and patted her arm warmly. “Katherine, of course they can dance; they are Highlanders. Highland warriors practice intricate dances to help build their agility, and then they celebrate victory by dancing them. Ye have nothing to be embarrassed about. Even though these country dances are not simple, ye did very well for your first attempt.”

He leaned a little closer and, lowering his voice conspiratorially, he said “Ye know very well if there had been much room to criticize, Lady MacIan would not have missed the opportunity, but ye will notice she doesn’t dance at all.”

Katherine had to laugh at the notion that it was possible to consider silence from Eithne as praise. It did give her the confidence to try again when both Fingal and Father Colm asked her to dance later in the evening.

The merry-making continued well into the wee hours of the morning. Katherine sat by Niall watching the festivities. So exhausted she could barely sit upright, but not ready to leave the celebration, she decided she would just rest her eyes for a moment.

Father Colm sat on Niall's other side with Diarmad, Fingal, and Malcolm, telling more stories from his young warrior days that had the other men roaring with laughter. Katherine was startled by one particularly explosive burst of laughter and raised her head, looking at the priest in confusion. Father Colm nudged Niall, inclined his head toward Katherine and said with a grin "I think it's time ye took that one to bed."

~ * ~

The yuletide festivities continued for twelve days. The day after Christmas was the feast of St. Stephan the Martyr. After the extended festivities of the evening before, Katherine was surprised to see so much activity in the keep the next morning. There were baskets filled with hay, salt, and oats in the great hall. Upon seeing this she whispered to Niall, "What is all of this for?"

"Did ye not seek St. Stephan's blessing in the Lowlands?"

"When I was little my papa gave coins to the poor on St. Stephan's day, but Uncle Ambrose certainly didn't."

"Here we ask St. Stephan's blessing on horses and livestock. Father will bless the hay, salt, and oats during Mass and it will be distributed amongst the farmers. Then the blessed items will be given to sick or injured animals during the year. Father will also bless the horses in my stable after Mass."

Katherine had never heard of this custom. "Why? St. Stephan was a martyr who was stoned to death because of his faith in Christ. What is his connection to livestock?"

Niall's eyes twinkled as he said, "There are several answers to that question, lass. The first is, according to legend, St. Stephan had a horse that he loved, but the horse became very ill. Christ cured St. Stephan's beloved horse and that is why Stephan's faith was so strong."

"It sounds as if ye don't believe that legend."

"Well, sweetling, I have had some fine horses in my life and I surely would thank God if he intervened to save one of them. However, I'm not sure I would face a stoning for the love of a horse."

"But it wasn't for the love of a horse, it was—oh never mind," she said when she realized he was teasing her. "What are the other reasons for blessing livestock?"

"Some say because little work is done between Christmas and Epiphany, it is a holiday for the livestock as well, particularly for beasts of burden like horses and oxen. Since St. Stephan's day falls on the first day after Christmas, it is a good a time as any to bless them."

"I guess that is reasonable, but I can tell by your grin there is more."

"Now, ye see, lass, in ancient times, before we all became God-

fearing Christians and heathens roamed the land, it is said horses were sacrificed at the winter solstice. When Christians put a stop to animal sacrifices, the horses in the Highlands, being good Christians themselves, were exceedingly grateful and thanked the first saint whose feast day fell soon after the solstice. St. Stephan would have been an ungrateful sot if he had refused to be their patron, so it was really a case of the Highland horses picking the saint as opposed to the other way round."

Katherine laughed and Niall found himself thanking all the saints for giving him this beautiful lass, whose laughter must surely be sweeter than the songs of angels.

~ * ~

The celebration continued the next day on the Feast of St. John the Evangelist. Father Colm blessed kegs of wine called "The Love of St. John" in the morning to be served later at the feast. This was a tradition Katherine was familiar with, however the Clan celebrated in another way, as well. Because St. John lived to be a very old man, the eldest members of the clan were honored at this feast and sat with Niall and Katherine at the laird's table. Niall watched her with pride as she listened to their stories, laughing merrily with them. Once more he realized how fortunate he was she had accepted his clan as her own and treated these elders with the kindness and respect they were due. His mother, Lady MacIan in name only, didn't even attend this feast.

When the music started he claimed Katherine for dance after dance until she begged him to stop.

"Aren't ye tired of me stepping on your feet yet?" she laughed.

"Was it ye who was stepping on my feet? I thought sure it must be Turcuil," he said with a wink and laughed at her mock outrage. "Truthfully, Katherine, I would rather dance with ye all night and suffer bruised toes than dance with any other partner, regardless of how skilled she might be."

Katherine laughed. "That is the Love of St. John talking."

Niall laughed, too. He suspected love had something to do with it, but perhaps not the blessed wine. Taking her in his arms, he said, "Have I thanked ye yet?"

"Thanked me for what?"

He motioned to the celebration around them. "For this."

"Planning a feast is no great ordeal."

"Not for planning it, pet. The MacIans haven't had much to celebrate, and nothing to celebrate with, for the last few years. It is only because of ye the clan is safe and whole."

"Nay, Niall, ye sought the king's help, saving me and Tomas in the process. I have a home and family again." The warmth and love Niall

saw in her eyes took his breath away.

Fingal, who stood nearby, said, “Perhaps ye would honor a member of your new family with a dance, then?”

Katherine laughed. “If your toes can stand it, I suppose I can.”

~ * ~

The third day after Christmas was Childermas, honoring the young boys in Bethlehem who were killed by King Herod. In the same way that elders were honored on the Feast of John the Evangelist, sometimes children were given special treats on Childermas.

At the midday meal, Eithne asked, “Has young Tomas had his beating yet today?” Tomas’ eyes grew wide with fear and Father Colm looked up from his conversation with Cairbre.

“We don’t observe that tradition at Duncurra,” Katherine said coolly. Tomas had had more than enough beatings in his life. He didn’t need another one to fully understand the cruelty of men.

“I am glad to hear that, my lady,” said Father Colm. “It is a ridiculous custom and one that I don’t hold with, either.”

“Come now, Father, Katherine,” Malcolm said, “some people think a child is destined to have bad luck if he doesn’t receive a few whacks in memory of the Holy Innocents.” Malcolm called to Niall, who was deep in conversation with Diarmad, “Niall, what’s this I hear about not beating children on Childermas?” Wide eyed with fear, Tomas slid off his chair, maneuvering very close to Katherine.

Katherine found Laird MacLennan’s satisfied smile, as well as the pleasure he appeared to derive from Tomas’ discomfort, very disturbing.

Before Niall could respond, Katherine said, clearly very irritated, “Laird MacLennan, please cease this discussion now. No one will be beaten here, today or ever.”

“Katherine, dear, please calm down” said Niall. “I think Malcolm was just teasing.”

She didn’t think Malcolm was teasing and she knew Eithne wasn’t. She answered, “I apologize if I misunderstood you, Laird. Please understand, I don’t see the humor in beating a child or anyone else.” Katherine excused herself from the table, leaving the great hall with Tomas, who still looked terrified. She wanted to reassure him, so she took him to her room and sat with him by the fire.

“Why does Laird MacLennan want to beat me?”

She tried to explain Childermas and the reason for the custom, although it had always seemed absurd to her. “Tomas, it must have been a terrifying day when Herod murdered all the little boys in Bethlehem. Think how scared they must have been. There are people who think if children feel just a little of that fear and pain, they will remember the sacrifice of the Holy Innocents.”

“But ye don’t think so?”

“Nay. In fact, I think it may be easier to think about the Holy Innocents if we aren’t worried about ourselves, don’t ye?”

“Aye,” he agreed solemnly.

“Sweetheart, ye know I won’t let anyone hurt ye?”

“Aye, but what if someday ye aren’t near? I don’t like him. I don’t like Da’s mother, either.”

“I know, pet, some people are very hard to like,” Katherine agreed. “Sometimes it is just best to stay away from them.”

~ * ~

“Well, that was rude,” snapped Eithne, when Katherine left the hall.

Niall glared at Eithne and said to Malcolm, “I’m sure ye can understand, Malcolm, my wife is sensitive about the subject of beating.”

“Niall, I am so very sorry, how thoughtless of me. How could I possibly have forgotten? I should go and apologize to her.”

“That won’t be necessary, I’m sure she understood.” Niall assured him. “I promised Tomas we would go out for a ride this afternoon. I will tell Katherine again that you intended no harm.”

Fingal watched the entire exchange, dumbfounded. Katherine had nearly died in Malcolm’s keep. He understood his mother’s callousness, but Malcolm’s surprised him. Fingal found Niall’s calm acceptance of the situation extremely irritating as well. When was he going to wake up?

Chapter 18

After the small upset on Childermas, the festivities continued until the Epiphany, which celebrated the visitation of the Magi. On this day, people exchanged gifts in commemoration of the Magi's gifts to the Christ child. When Katherine and Niall woke that morning, before leaving their chambers, he gave her his gift. Katherine fingered the delicate silver filigree brooch, inlaid with small precious stones, reverently. "It is beautiful, Niall, thank you." She attached her *airisaidh* around her shoulders with it. "I have a gift for ye, too." She smiled. "But I can't give it to ye today."

"Why not?" He feigned disappointment.

"Because it isn't ready yet."

"When will it be ready?"

"Early August, I think." Katherine grinned.

Niall looked at her in confusion until the meaning of what she had said sank in. "Katherine, are ye with child?" he asked.

"I think so. I have all the signs. I am tired, cranky, and I feel sick half the time. When I missed my monthly courses in November, I thought maybe it was just from the upset over Eithne, but I have passed the time they are due in December now, too."

Thrilled, Niall pulled her into his arms and kissed her. He couldn't have been happier; the woman he loved was going to give him a child. *The woman he loved*. In spite of everything preventing him from admitting it, he did love her, deeply and passionately. How could he ever have tried not to? Finally, he asked, "How long have ye known?"

"I have suspected it for a couple of weeks, but I spoke with Effie yesterday and she confirmed it. I wanted ye to know as soon as I did. But it's still so early in my pregnancy, I was thinking perhaps we should not announce this news just yet. Maybe we could wait a little longer."

"We will wait as long as ye wish, Katherine."

~ * ~

After they attended Mass and broke their fast, Niall said to Tomas, "Are ye ready to see your gift now?" Tomas nodded eagerly. "Well, we will have to go outside to see it."

Katherine laughed as Tomas grabbed her hand and dragged her to the door with them. Pulling their plaids over their heads to block the cold, Niall and Katherine led Tomas to the stable where he found his present, a sturdy Highland pony.

The boy could barely contain himself. "Does he have a name?"

"Nay," answered Katherine, "but your pony is not a 'he'. Ye will need to pick a lass's name."

He thought for a moment, looking very serious, "Then I want to

call her Mab," he finally said.

"Why Mab?" asked Niall.

"I think it's a pretty name and Maura told me a story once about a fairy queen named Mab."

"Then Mab it is," said Katherine.

Niall helped Tomas saddle the little pony, letting him ride in the courtyard. The tolerant pony seemed undaunted by the boy's youthful exuberance. Niall stayed close, giving Tomas instructions on how to hold the reins to control where the pony went. Niall had selected this animal carefully and, watching them together, Katherine knew he had made a good choice. Gentle enough to be safe, Mab also had enough pluck to be a worthy mount for an energetic lad.

As Katherine watched them, she remembered the pure joy she had felt when her father had given her Stormy. Giving Tomas the pony had been Niall's idea, but she wholeheartedly agreed. In this moment, she felt truly and completely happy. She did not want to break the spell, but she had responsibilities she could not ignore, and the wind also grew fierce and cold. "I am going to freeze solid if I stay out here any longer. Besides there is still much to do."

"Please, can I ride longer, Mama?" Tomas asked.

Niall answered, "We will let your mama go inside before she freezes, but ye can ride a few more minutes before we see Mab tucked in."

Katherine walked over to give them each a kiss before she went inside. She whispered softly in Niall's ear, "I think it would be a good idea for Tomas to have a rest this afternoon before the feast."

Niall grinned and said, "That could be a challenge. I seem to remember unsuccessfully ordering his mother to 'rest' once."

Katherine laughed. "Do what ye can."

"Speaking of his mother resting, I know I cannot order ye to sleep, but I want ye to lie down in bed and close your eyes for a while this afternoon. The evening will be long for ye, too. Was that specific enough?"

"Aye, Laird," she said, grinning at him. She turned to reenter the keep, thinking "a while" still left a lot of room for interpretation.

~ * ~

Much too excited to sleep, Tomas laid down on the bed that afternoon as his da had told him to do. *Only babies took naps.* He frowned and stared at the bed's canopy, thinking about his new pony. Finally, he decided if he could just check on Mab one more time and make sure she didn't need him, he could try to sleep then. He got out of bed and peeked out the chamber door into the hall, looking for anyone who might object. Seeing no one, he slipped very quietly into the corridor and down the stairs. He made it all the way past the

second floor without meeting a soul, but before getting to the armory, he heard voices whispering at the bottom of the stairs. He crouched down so whoever was there wouldn't see him, listening impatiently for them to leave. At first he couldn't understand what they were saying, but as he listened more closely, he heard something that terrified him.

"Everything has been arranged as ye required. It can only end in Niall's death this time, and Duncurra will finally be yours."

"I am ready to be done with this mockery. I have pretended to be jovial and devoted for too long. I am just sorry I won't be the one to kill him. Part of me wants him to know it was me."

As quietly as he could, Tomas slipped back up the stairs. He wanted to stop at his mother's room, but afraid whoever was at the bottom of the stairs would hear him, he went to his own room and shut the door. He didn't know what to do. They had been talking about killing his da. He needed to tell someone, but was so afraid of running into the bad people he couldn't leave his room. He sat crouched by the fire for what seemed like hours when Fineen finally tapped on his door and entered. "Tomas, your mother sent me to bring ye down to the feast."

"I need to talk to Mama," he said.

"Well, come on then, she's downstairs." Tomas worried about the people in the stairwell, but if he was with Fineen he would be safe until he could talk to Da or Mama.

His parents sat at the head table, but Lady Eithne, who was sitting near Mama, scared him. He didn't like Laird MacLennan either, but he was sitting near Da. Tomas would have to wait until he could talk to one of them alone.

He went to the table and his mama gave him a kiss. "For someone who wasn't tired, that was quite a nap."

Tomas just nodded, moving as close to her as possible.

She cocked her head to one side, "Tomas, is everything all right?"

He nodded again but didn't speak.

"Do ye want to go sit with Uncle Fingal and have something to eat?"

"Katherine, you do not give children options. They should be told what to do and taught to obey," Eithne scolded.

"Thank you, Eithne, we will have to disagree on that. Life is full of duties and obligations. I see no benefit in creating more where it isn't necessary," his mother said mildly, but he did not want to stay near Lady Eithne anyway. He backed away and ran to where Uncle Fingal sat.

Tomas had never experienced feasts and celebrations like the ones at Duncurra. He loved the little pies filled with shredded meat and

spices. He had never had one before, but they had been served every evening since Christmas. Nevan had told him it was good luck to eat one on each of the twelve days, but Tomas wasn't very hungry tonight.

On all of the other nights he didn't want the fun to end, but now he was anxious for the celebration to be over. He needed to talk to Mama, but every time he tried, there were too many people around. He remembered thinking he would just put his head on the table for a minute. He awoke the next morning snuggly tucked into his own bed.

Dressing quickly, he hurried downstairs, stopping to tap softly at his mother's door, but no one answered. He listened cautiously from the top of the stairs to the first floor to make sure the stairwell was empty before hurrying down to the great hall. Neither his parents nor Uncle Fingal were there, but thankfully, Lady MacIan and Laird MacLennan were absent as well. Father Colm sat at the table chatting with Diarmad, so Tomas went to them.

"Have ye seen my mama?" Tomas asked, climbing into a chair beside Diarmad.

"Not yet, Tomas," answered Father Colm.

Diarmad added, "I saw your da before he went out hunting and he said ye might want me to take ye to ride your pony this morning." He motioned for a serving maid to bring a bowl of porridge to Tomas.

"I don't know," said Tomas feeling very worried. "I need to talk to my mama." He ate his porridge with his brow still furrowed.

"Ye don't know if ye want to go riding?" asked Diarmad. "Your da had to pry ye off that pony yesterday."

"I want to ride Mab, but I really need to talk to Mama."

"Is something bothering ye, lad?" asked Father Colm, looking concerned.

Tomas liked both Father Colm and Diarmad. He really needed to tell someone about what he had heard, but the people he overheard had whispered. Not being able to recognize their voices, Tomas didn't know whom to trust. He didn't think it could have been Diarmad or Father Colm, but he would feel much better talking to Mama. "Well, I —," Tomas saw Lady MacIan and Laird MacLennan enter the great hall. Looking at Diarmad, he said, "I would like to ride my pony. Can we go now?"

~ * ~

That morning, Katherine slept much longer than she usually did. Between the late night and her pregnancy, she knew she probably needed the rest, but she felt guilty anyway. She hurried down to the great hall to find the castle servants well about the business of the day. Lady MacIan commented, "Katherine, dear, it is a wonder anything at all gets done around here with the lady of the castle

sleeping half the day away."

Father Colm laughed, saying, "Now, Lady MacIan, I would hardly say half the day is gone. Why, ye yourself have only just arisen."

Lady MacIan glared, but she said no more.

Grateful for the support, Katherine flashed the priest a quick smile. For once Eithne's sharp tongue had actually given Katherine a valid reason to escape for a while instead of only the impotent desire to do so. "As I am getting a later start than usual today, I'm sure you will excuse me if I don't join you for your morning meal. I have duties to attend to."

Katherine walked toward the kitchens, followed by Father Colm, who asked, "Lady Katherine, do ye mind if I walk with ye? There is something I would like to discuss."

"Not at all," she answered.

Father Colm inclined his head toward Eithne and Malcolm and said, "Please excuse me." After they left the great hall he said, "Lady Katherine, your son seemed anxious about something this morning. He wanted to talk to ye. Diarmad and I tried to find out what was bothering him, but as soon as Laird MacLennan and Lady Eithne arrived, Tomas said no more. He has gone to the stables with Diarmad."

"That doesn't surprise me. I'm sure you have noticed Niall assigns one of his guards to keep an eye on Tomas every day."

Father Colm chuckled, "I had noticed Tomas always seemed to have a guard with him. The days when Turcuil becomes a fierce dragon who needs taming are humorous indeed. I did not know the reason."

Katherine laughed, too, and went on, "Well, the primary reason is to keep Tomas away from Lady MacIan."

"That seems like a wise choice. It also explains a few things. Clearly the lad is cautious of both Lady MacIan and Laird MacLennan. I have found children and dogs to be uncanny judges of character. I will keep an eye on Tomas as well."

"Thank ye, Father. I will find Tomas as soon as I have spoken with Bridie."

"It is probably nothing, but I'm sure he will feel better once he tells ye what it is," Father said with a reassuring smile. "Let me know if I can be of any help. I have some things to take care of in the chapel this morning."

It took much longer for her to seek Tomas out than she had anticipated. Before Katherine finished with Bridie, a servant came rushing into the kitchen looking for her.

"My lady, there has been an accident on the training field. Fingal is hurt. They're bringing him up to the castle now."

“Please go to my chamber quickly and bring me my bag of supplies.” Katherine sent other servants to prepare Fingal’s chamber and to bring other supplies she would need. Then she rushed to meet the men carrying him.

From a distance she saw blood drenched his left side, but he was still alert. When she reached him, she assessed his wound quickly. It looked more severe than it actually was. Relief flooded her and she thanked God and his angels for their protection. “This isn’t nearly as bad as I feared. Why, it is a scratch, really,” she teased.

Fingal groaned. “Just a scratch, is it? It hurts a tad more than any scratch I’ve ever had.”

“Well, perhaps it is wee bit deeper than most scratches. I will clean and stitch it, but ye’ll be fine. The bleeding has already slowed. How did this happen?”

Rab explained, “One of the young soldiers in training made a wild swing and lost his balance. As he fell, he slammed into Fingal’s back. Fingal was forced forward onto Bruce’s blade, with whom he was sparring. Bruce saw it happening and tried to avoid Fingal, but still managed to give him that wee scratch.”

When they arrived in Fingal’s chamber, Edna awaited them with all the supplies Katherine required. Katherine asked Turcuil to stay, fearing that he might need to hold Fingal still while she worked. “Drink this,,” she said, giving her patient a potion.

He swallowed it, shuddering when the cup was empty. “God’s bones, what kind of poison is this?”

“I’m sorry, I know it’s bitter, but it will help with the pain. Here is some ale to get rid of the taste.”

“Couldn’t we have started with the ale and skipped the other?”

“This is likely to hurt quite a bit. I’m sure ye’ll be thankful for both.”

“I believe ye; thousands wouldn’t.”

She gave the potion a few minutes to begin working before she started stitching. She had hoped between the potion and the pain, he would lose consciousness, but he didn’t. With his jaw set and fists clenched, he remained silent as Katherine worked. By the time she tied off the last stitch, he looked pale and exhausted from the ordeal.

“Try to rest now. The potion I gave ye should make ye sleepy. Turcuil, please stay with him and let me know if anything changes.”

“I don’t need a big, ugly nursemaid. Now, if perhaps the fair Fineen wanted to tend to my needs, I wouldn’t turn her away.”

“Ye are a rogue, Fingal MacIan. I think it would be best for ye to keep your mind and your hands off the ‘fair Fineen’ until your side is healed. I don’t want to have to sew ye up again. Edna will bring ye some broth shortly and I want ye to drink it all.” Katherine laughed

when Fingal pouted, looking very much like Tomas did when disgruntled. It reminded her that she needed to find Tomas. “If he won’t let ye stay, Turcuil, would ye please look in on him frequently for me? I need to find Tomas, he was looking for me earlier.”

“Aye, my lady. I’ll try to forget he called me a maid.”

“He called ye big and ugly, too,” observed Edna.

“Aye, love, I won’t argue about being big and ugly, but I am no maid.”

“Well, if Fingal doesn’t want me to put bitter herbs in his broth, he’d better not call ye ugly, either.”

Fingal rolled his eyes, causing Katherine to laugh as she left them to look for Tomas.

~ * ~

She found him tending Mab in the stable. “Father Colm said ye were looking for me earlier.”

“Aye, I was. I have to tell ye something, but we need to be alone.”

“We could go to my room. Will that do?” He nodded and they walked to the keep, going straight to the east tower. Katherine had barely shut the door to her chamber when Tomas’ arms were around her, holding tight as if he were afraid of something. “Tomas, what is it, sweetheart?”

“Da told me to rest yesterday and I went to my room but I just couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking Mab might need me. Mama, I only wanted to go out to the stable for a few minutes to check on her, and I was going to go back to my room and rest like Da said to.”

“So ye snuck out to the stables when ye were supposed to be resting? Is that what has ye so upset?” He seemed awfully distressed over something so small.

“Nay, I didn’t get to the stables. When I walked down the stairs, I heard two people talking in the stairwell. They were whispering and I couldn’t understand most of it, but one of them said Da was going to die.”

“What? Maybe ye misunderstood.”

“One person said something was going to end in Da’s death and Duncurra would finally be the other person’s. Mama, I don’t want Da to die.” Tomas was near tears.

“Tomas, don’t worry, Da isn’t going to die. Sweetheart, did ye hear them say anything else?”

Tomas nodded, tears slipping down his cheeks, “The other person said something about pretending to be something for too long, and being sorry he wouldn’t be the one to kill Da, because he wanted Da to know it was him.”

“Then the people ye heard talking were men? Did ye see them?” Katherine asked.

“I think they were men. I don’t know, they were whispering. I didn’t see them. Mama, I was scared and I went back to my room. I was afraid to come out. When Fineen brought me downstairs I wanted to tell ye, but I didn’t want—anyone to hear. Then I tried to find ye this morning, but I couldn’t.”

“It will be all right, Tomas. Stop crying, sweetheart. As soon as your da comes home, we’ll tell him. He will know what to do.” Katherine tried to reassure him, but her own mind spun as she tried to process what the boy had told her. She didn’t understand what, and perhaps more importantly, who Tomas had overheard.

“I don’t want to go down to the great hall. I want to stay here with ye.”

“Ye can stay here, Tomas. I will just let Edna know ye are not feeling well, so I will be here with ye here for a while. That way she can find me in case anyone needs me.” She decided not to worry him more by telling him Fingal was injured. “I will be right back.”

He nodded, looking forlorn.

Katherine went downstairs, found Edna, and explained that Tomas wasn’t feeling well and she was going to sit with him for a bit. She asked Edna to send up some soup and bread, then returned to Tomas. Diarmad was on his way downstairs after having checked on Fingal, and met Katherine on her way up. “Diarmad, Tomas isn’t feeling well, if ye see Niall, will ye ask him to come up?”

“Certainly, my lady, but the laird went out with a hunting party and I don’t expect him back until late this afternoon. Tomas seemed upset earlier, is there anything I can do?”

“Nay, thank ye, Diarmad, it is probably just a combination of rich food and late nights,” she assured him. Because Tomas had no idea who he had overheard, she did not intend to tell anyone the real problem until she had talked to Niall.

Chapter 19

Finally, very late in the afternoon, Niall returned from hunting. He learned of Fingal's accident immediately and left his horse with the stable master. He intended to go straight upstairs to check on his brother, but Malcolm called to him when he entered the great hall. "Niall, lad, come join me," he said, motioning to a servant to bring another tankard of ale.

"I'll be down in a few minutes, I just want to see how my clumsy brother is faring."

"There is no need to rush to Fingal's side," teased Malcolm. "It was merely a flesh wound and your wife has tended him well. She has been absent from us all afternoon. I'm sure if there were any problem with Fingal we would know about it. Come, sit and warm yourself."

Niall scowled. "If it was only a flesh wound, why was it necessary for Katherine to spend the afternoon tending him?"

"Well, ye know women—they all love the attention of handsome young men. A captive audience is irresistible." He winked.

Niall fumed as he headed for the east tower. He went straight to Fingal's chamber and entered without knocking, only to find Fingal alone and asleep. As he left the room, Niall met Diarmad in the corridor.

"How fares your brother this evening?" asked Diarmad.

"He is asleep."

"He has been most of the afternoon. Katherine gave him a potion when she stitched him up."

"Katherine didn't stay with him?"

"I don't know, I don't think so. Turcuil and Edna have kept an eye on him and were to notify Katherine if anything changed. Although with love blossoming, I am not sure they would notice. I believe she is in your chambers with Tomas now. He apparently is not feeling well. She wanted to see ye as soon as ye returned from hunting."

"Tomas is ill, too?" Niall headed to the stairs without waiting for an answer. When he reached their chamber, he found Katherine sitting with Tomas on her lap telling him a story.

She looked up and her face flooded with relief, "Oh Niall, I am so glad you're home." She stood Tomas on the floor and crossed the room to hug him.

He returned her hug, and put his hand on Tomas' face, saying, "Diarmad said Tomas is ill." Although the boy appeared to be upset, he didn't feel feverish.

"He isn't ill," Katherine explained. "Something very upsetting happened yesterday and I wanted to talk to ye about it. I thought it better to keep him away from—everyone, until I did. Tomas, tell your

da what ye told me."

Tomas told the same story about slipping downstairs unnoticed and overhearing the whispered conversation. "Da, I don't want ye to die," he said as he burst into tears again.

Niall felt the anger rising in him but he tried not to let it show. "Stop crying, Tomas, I am not going to die, but I need ye to tell me as much as ye can about what ye overheard. Were they men? Did ye recognize either voice?"

"They were whispering and I couldn't hear them well. I think they were men, but I don't know for sure."

"What exactly did they say?" pressed Niall.

Tomas looked scared and Katherine said, "Tomas, Da isn't angry with ye, he just wants ye to try to remember everything ye can."

"One person said everything was arranged and it would end in your death, Da, and he said Duncurra would belong to the other person then. The other person said he pretended to be something for too long. He was the one who said he was sorry. He wasn't the one who would kill ye, because he wanted ye to know it was him. That's all I remember."

Seething, but not wanting to scare Tomas more than he already was, Niall said, "It will be all right, don't worry." Then the laird sent for Rab and instructed him to take the boy to his chamber and to let no one other than himself or Katherine into the room. When they were finally alone, he turned to Katherine and said with barely contained wrath, "It must be Fingal."

"Fingal?" Katherine said, aghast. "Niall, it certainly is not Fingal. He is loyal to ye—he loves ye."

"Nay, Katherine, he loves ye," Niall spat. "It can only be him. He thinks he would be Duncurra's heir if I died. My dear little brother may have waited too long. He doesn't realize there is another heir on the way."

"Niall, I think ye are jumping to conclusions. Talk to Fingal about this rationally."

"I will talk to Fingal, but I can't right now because he is sleeping off the potion ye gave him," Niall snapped. The stunned look on Katherine's face did not cool his anger, even though part of him knew he was being irrational.

Katherine stammered, "I-I just gave him something to help with the pain."

"Well, we certainly wouldn't want Fingal to be uncomfortable, would we?"

She remained silent for a moment, then said softly, "What are we going to do about Tomas?"

"*We* aren't going to do anything. Tomorrow, after Fingal wakes, I

will get to the bottom of this. If ye aren't too busy tending my brother, I will take ye down now for the evening meal. Don't speak of this to anyone."

Katherine said no more. During the meal Niall knew by his people's reactions his unusually short-temper was clearly apparent. Katherine remained subdued and quieter than normal. *Fine, everyone will assume we are arguing and there will be nothing to explain*. As soon as dinner was over, Niall offered his apologies to Malcolm and Eithne, retiring with Katherine. On their way up the stairs, Katherine said, "I would like to check on—"

"Fingal?" Niall said sharply. "Don't ye think ye have offered him enough comfort for one day?"

Katherine folded her hands in front of her and took a deep breath before saying with a controlled, calm voice, "Niall, I would like to check on *our son* before we retire. It is not necessary for me to check on Fingal. His wound is not serious. I'm not sure what I've done to anger ye, but I have not seen Fingal since I stitched him up this afternoon. As soon as I bandaged his wound, I gave instructions to Turcuil and Edna to look after him. I have not been back since then. If anything goes awry, they will let me know."

Niall wondered why she would say this when Malcolm had clearly told him she was with Fingal, but he didn't call her on the lie. "I will go check on Tomas. Ye go to bed."

"Niall, he is afraid. I want to see him and kiss him goodnight."

"Do not argue with me tonight," he growled, opening the door of their chamber for her. She walked silently past him and he shut the door before she could say anything else.

When Niall returned, he found Katherine combing her hair, getting ready for bed. She looked so very beautiful, and even though he was angry, he ached with need for her. Why had she spent the afternoon with Fingal and lied to him about it? He pulled her roughly into his arms. With one arm he held her to his chest, knotting his other hand in her hair so she could not turn away. His lips slanted across hers and his tongue plundered her mouth relentlessly. She responded to him by wrapping her arms around his neck and returning his kiss ardently.

He broke the kiss. "Why did ye lie to me?" He searched her face for a clue to what she was thinking but saw only confusion.

"Niall, I don't know what ye are talking about. I have never lied to ye and I never will. I love ye."

He gave her another searing kiss, wanting to believe her. He remembered the unbearable pain of betrayal at the hands of a woman whom he thought he loved, and didn't think he could live through that again. When he drew away from her, he said fiercely, "Ye are

mine, Katherine. Ye are mine. I will not share ye!"

"Aye, Niall, I am only yours, completely and forever. I love ye."

He wondered if he was mad for believing those words, but he wanted them to be true. He carried her to the bed and made love to her urgently and passionately. She responded to his every touch with abandon. He wanted her, needed her, as he had never wanted or needed another person. How could she possibly understand that, and how could she possibly feel the same way about him? He poured his searing need into their joining, as if by the sheer intensity of his love-making he could convey all of this to her.

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Afterwards, when they both lay spent, his slow, regular breathing signaled that he slept. She lay with her head over his heart, gently stroking his chest and shoulder. She wondered if he would ever release the pain and doubt plaguing him, which made him so uncertain of her devotion. Eventually her mind turned to the events of the day.

Who had Tomas overheard? Katherine didn't want to believe, couldn't believe, Fingal was one of the men involved, nor could she understand why Niall believed it with such assurance. She decided surely Niall would realize this when his anger cooled. Perhaps in the morning he would see things more rationally.

In the wee hours of the morning they awoke to the sound of Diarmad pounding on their chamber door. "Laird, wake up! There has been a raid to the southwest. The fires have been spotted by the watch."

Niall jumped out of bed, dressing in an instant. He strapped on his sword before turning to Katherine, who had arisen and was dressing as well. "Ye stay here in this room. Don't leave for any reason until I come back," he ordered sternly. "I mean it, Katherine," he added even more forcefully, and strode out of the room, slamming the door.

Katherine stared after him in wide-eyed shock. She wasn't sure if he had confined her to their chambers for her own safety or for some other reason, but she would not provoke his ire further by defying him. She did not leave the chamber.

~ * ~

By the time Niall and a contingent of his men reached the site of the raid, the small cluster of farmers' cottages and barns had burned to the ground. The raiders had completely destroyed everything in the dead of the night. Unlike the other raids, in which they stole animals or burned hay, this time they had senselessly slaughtered the animals and set fire to the whole lot. The only thing for which Niall could be thankful was that the raiders had pulled his people from their homes before they torched the buildings. Even so, they killed three men, who

had apparently tried to interfere. Surveying the ruins, he knew Matheson intended to send a message by leaving this devastation.

Diarmad approached him. “Do ye want to send men to follow the raider’s trail?”

Niall shook his head. “There is no need. We know the trail will lead to Matheson and we have little hope of catching them now. We must get these people back to Duncurra. When they are safe, I will decide what needs to be done.”

Diarmad nodded. “Apparently, Matheson has returned your message. Old Una just told me the leader said to tell ye, ‘Duncurra is next.’”

~ * ~

Niall brooded silently as they rode back to Duncurra, arriving after daybreak. He and Diarmad went to the great hall, and he asked Cairbre and Alan to join them. He trusted these three men above all others. Once they arrived, he dismissed the servants and told his men about the conversation Tomas had overheard.

Diarmad said, “Do ye think the pair he heard were somehow involved in this raid?”

Niall shook his head in frustration. “I don’t know. He heard them say ‘everything was arranged,’ but he also seemed to think whatever they were talking about would end in my death.”

“Maybe they were lying in wait, assuming ye would follow the raiders,” Diarmad suggested.

“Ye didn’t track the raiders?” asked Alan.

“It seemed pointless. They had already wrought the destruction and I decided it was more important to get my people safely back to Duncurra. Now I wish I had followed the spineless curs.”

“Well,” said Cairbre, “if they were lying in wait, ye can bet ye would have been significantly outnumbered. Cowards are more likely to rely on numbers than skill. They lose more of their own, but achieve the outcome they desire. If it was their plan to ambush ye, your compassion for your clan has thwarted their attempt.”

“Perhaps,” said Niall, “but regardless of whether this attack was what the conspirators were discussing or not, I have a much bigger problem. Someone here at Duncurra is plotting my death, and the evidence points in one direction—Fingal.”

The men stared at him in astonishment. Cairbre was the first to respond. “Laird, that isn’t possible. Fingal has worshipped ye from the moment he could toddle. There is no one more loyal to ye than your brother.”

Niall turned on him darkly. “Really?” he asked with derision. “Whoever it was admitted to pretending to be something he wasn’t. Fingal’s devotion could all be pretense. Tell me, who else would

inherit Duncurra?"

"Laird, I know it looks damning, but I, too, can't believe Fingal is behind this," Diarmad insisted.

"What is Fingal behind?" asked Malcolm casually as he walked into the great hall.

"Well, ye may as well know, too," said Niall, before quickly running through the events of the last few days.

Malcolm looked shocked and concerned. "I have trouble believing your brother could be involved in a plot against ye, Niall. Perhaps young Tomas misheard or imagined the whole thing. Maybe he just made it up for the attention."

Niall shook his head. "Nay, I have questioned him at length. His story doesn't vary, and he's terrified. I believe the boy heard what he said he did. My brother thinks he is the one who would inherit Duncurra."

"Isn't he?" asked Malcolm.

"Nay. Katherine wanted to wait to make the announcement, but she is with child. If something were to happen to me, the bairn stands to inherit, not Fingal."

Niall's men congratulated him, their happiness dampened somewhat by the serious circumstances in which they found themselves.

Niall said, "Perhaps Fingal worried about something like this. The attacks increased after I married. Maybe he was hoping to seize control before there was an heir."

Alan said, "Niall, I can't explain what Tomas overheard, but like Cairbre and Diarmad, I cannot believe Fingal is behind it."

"If ye are sure the lad is telling the truth, now, as I think more about it, I'm not so sure it isn't Fingal," Malcolm said. "He certainly would expect to inherit Duncurra. He also knows, and by all accounts, was friendly with Tadhg Matheson while they were in training. If Matheson was aiding him, it would explain why the conspirator bemoaned his loss in not being the one to kill ye. He expected Matheson or one of his men would. Maybe Fingal staged his own accident to ensure no one suspected him."

"I think it is time we had a chat with my brother," said Niall, his expression dark and cold. "Diarmad, please go and invite him to join us."

"Laird, he is injured. Perhaps we should go to him."

"My wife assures me Fingal's injury is not serious. I am certain he can make it down the stairs with your assistance," Niall said with barely controlled rage.

"Aye, Laird." Diarmad bowed his head slightly and went to fetch Fingal.

Malcolm furrowed his brow. “I hear your wife is an extremely skilled healer. I’m sure Fingal is doing very well today after her tender ministrations.”

Niall scowled.

“Ye don’t suppose,” continued Malcolm, “Fingal knew Katherine was expecting?”

“That makes no sense,” said Niall crossly. “If he knew, there would be no reason for him to seek my death. He wouldn’t inherit Duncurra anyway.”

“Unless,” said Malcolm, so quietly only Niall could hear him, “he planned to eliminate Katherine as well.”

Niall’s heart stopped. If he thought that was a possibility, he would kill Fingal with his bare hands. He wouldn’t let anything happen to Katherine and the baby.

“Or perhaps the bairn isn’t yours.”

Niall’s expression suddenly turned murderous.

Malcolm rushed on. “Nay, think about it, Niall. Ye said Katherine didn’t want to announce the pregnancy yet. Perhaps they both know the bairn could be Fingal’s. If he were to eliminate ye before Katherine’s pregnancy was announced, he could marry the grieving widow and no one would be the wiser. Ye wouldn’t be the first man to have someone else’s bastard hidden under your protection.”

Niall seethed; Malcolm could be right. He had foolishly let his guard down. “Cairbre,” barked Niall, “fetch my wife here as well.”

“Aye, Laird.” Niall didn’t miss the worried look Cairbre gave Alan.

The laird sat in stony silence, considering what Malcolm had said. How could it be anyone except Fingal? But was Katherine involved, too? Fingal was young, much closer to Katherine’s age, and charming. Most women found him attractive. How many times had he heard Katherine’s musical laughter over something his brother said? When he suggested Fingal was at the bottom of this yesterday, she had jumped to his defense. By all that’s holy, she had spent the afternoon tending an injury that she herself said was not serious. Then she lied to him about it. How could he have let this happen again? What possessed him to open his heart to a woman, giving her the opportunity to destroy him?

Diarmad arrived in the great hall with a pale and drawn looking Fingal, just moments before Cairbre arrived with Katherine, who looked confused but guarded.

Chapter 20

One glance at Niall told Katherine he was dangerously angry, and for the first time since she'd married him, she was truly afraid.

"Good morning, brother." Niall nodded to Fingal. "Wife." He nodded to Katherine. "I am so pleased ye could both join us this morning. I think it is high time we discuss what has been going on around here."

Looking completely confused, Fingal said, "I'm sorry, Niall, it was only an accident. I should have kept the men farther apart on the training field. It won't happen again."

"I'm not referring to your accident. I am more concerned about the little conversation Tomas overheard before the feast on Epiphany."

"I'm not sure I understand. Tomas didn't mention a conversation to me."

"Nay, I'm sure he didn't," Niall said smoothly, "because he overheard two people plotting to kill me, and one of the two thought Duncurra would become his upon my death. Now, who could that have been?"

Fingal looked stunned, "Ye aren't suggesting I—"

"Silence," barked Niall. "Don't dig your grave deeper with your denials. What I want to know now is how Katherine is involved? Are ye lovers? Is the babe she carries yours?"

Katherine, who had been staring in utter astonishment at Niall, snapped, "Niall, how could ye think that, much less even speak it? Before anything else, I am your wife. I am devoted to ye, and I love ye with all my heart. Why do ye refuse to believe that?"

Niall sneered. "Ye give every indication of loving Fingal, too. I understand ye spent a cozy afternoon with him just yesterday."

"Ye blind idiot!" Katherine shouted as a rage every bit as hot as his own overtook her. "I have no idea why ye think I spent a 'cozy afternoon' with Fingal. I stitched and bandaged his wound; Turcuil and Edna were there the whole time. When I finished, I spent the afternoon with our son, who was terrified by what he had heard. I told ye that. Why would ye believe something else?"

Too angry to speak, Niall just stared as Katherine continued, "And as to loving Fingal, of course I do. I love Fingal as a brother, as your brother, because I love ye. What's more, Fingal loves ye, and even if I were inclined to be unfaithful, he would never betray ye. Why is it so hard for ye to fathom that? Am I betraying ye by loving Tomas? How about Father James and Father Colm? I love them, too, but Niall, ye are the heart of my heart, my soul mate. How can ye not see that?"

"He can't see it because he doesn't believe it's possible," spat Fingal. "He couldn't manage to earn my mother's love, but who could,

Niall? Do ye think she loves me anymore than she does ye? The only person she truly loves is herself, and yet ye will never give up trying."

Turning back to Katherine, Fingal continued, "Perhaps you didn't know this, but several years ago my brother fell for the wiles of a faithless, grasping bitch who betrayed him with another. She was never worthy of your love, Niall, but ye have been so tainted by her deceit, ye can't recognize genuine devotion when ye see it."

Then, sounding defeated, he said, "I don't know whom Tomas overheard, or why they would believe Duncurra would become theirs, but it wasn't me. The only thing I have ever wanted was your respect. When ye appointed me to your guard, I thought I had finally earned it, but that must have been an illusion as well. If my presence here causes ye such distress, as soon as I can travel, with your permission, I will leave Duncurra and return to Laird Chisholm."

Niall stared at both of them, speechless. Katherine trembled, forcing back her tears. She felt as if he had mortally wounded her. Fingal, ashen and obviously in pain, looked…lost. Niall shook his head and said in a calm voice, "Ye're not going anywhere except back to bed, Fingal. Katherine, give him something for pain. I will join ye in our chamber shortly."

Katherine ran out of the great hall and up to their chamber. Safely behind the closed door she broke down and sobbed. She had been afraid when she saw Niall's raw anger. She felt the same heart-stopping fear she had when she knew Uncle Ambrose was going to beat her. This man she loved so desperately had hurt her more deeply than anything Uncle Ambrose could have done. *You have learned the surest way to open yourself to hurt is to love, and yet you love anyway.*

How could he have accused her of something so awful? How could he doubt her so profoundly? After a few minutes, she pulled herself together, washed her face, and prepared the potion to give to Fingal—the same one Niall had seemed angry about yesterday. She shook her head at the irony.

Diarmad was helping Fingal into bed when Katherine arrived. He looked miserable.

"Here, drink this," she said, handing him the potion. "It will help with the pain."

"Is it the same bitter swill ye made me drink yesterday? Thanks, I think I'd rather be in pain."

Diarmad frowned at him and Fingal took the potion from her. "Still, I wouldn't want to be accused of not following orders," he said wryly. He swallowed it, grimacing at the taste.

"I'll send Edna up later to change your bandage," Katherine said flatly and turned to leave.

"Katherine, wait," called Fingal. She stopped but didn't turn

around as he went on. “I don’t know where that came from, but I am sorry. I know he loves ye; he didn’t mean to hurt ye like that.”

“Still, Fingal?” Katherine asked, turning slowly to look at him, “After he verbally scourged both of us for some imagined wrong, ye would still defend him and apologize for him? I think your attempts at winning your brother’s love and approval are as vain as my own.” She turned and left the room, returning to her chamber quickly lest she cry again.

~ * ~

Niall remained in the great hall brooding. Alan and Cairbre didn’t interrupt. Niall knew they would simply wait until he either dismissed them or drew them back into the discussion. Malcolm did not show the same deference, finally asking, “Ye don’t believe them, do ye?”

“Aye, Malcolm, I do,” said Niall irritably.

“Niall, I am afraid ye are becoming just like your father. He was too willing to trust people. That was his greatest fault. I hope it doesn’t destroy ye.” Niall didn’t respond and Malcolm continued, “Well, I had planned to return to Brathanead today, but if ye would like for me to stay until things are sorted out, I would be happy to.”

“My thanks, Malcolm, I don’t think that will be necessary. I don’t know whom Tomas overheard or what it means, and I really can’t see any solution to this issue with Matheson at the moment. Laying siege to Cnocreidh would be a colossal waste of resources. I will increase security along my western border and raid again to try and recover some of our losses, but I will not allow revenge to drive me to wreak the kind of destruction he did. If there is any way ye can help, I will send ye a message. Have a safe journey.”

“I’m sure you know best,” Malcolm said before he left the hall.

Diarmad returned as Malcolm was leaving. He approached Niall and said, “Fingal is in bed and your wife awaits ye in your chambers, Laird.”

Niall nodded but said nothing.

Diarmad shook his head. “Laird, I know it isn’t my place to tell ye this, but even at the risk of worsening your foul temper, I find myself agreeing with your lady wife.”

“Diarmad, I think we all agree with her,” said Cairbre dryly.

“Agree with what?” Niall snapped.

“Begging your pardon, that ye’re a blind idiot, Laird,” answered Alan.

Niall simply rubbed his temples and said, “Oh that, aye, that has been fairly well established.”

~ * ~

When Niall entered their chamber, he found Katherine sitting on the hearth hugging her knees to her chest with her head on them and

he knew she had been crying. She had pulled her kertch off and it lay on the floor beside her. He went to her and gently pulled her up off the floor, putting his arms around her. “Katherine, I’m sorry.”

“I can’t do this anymore,” Katherine said so softly he could barely hear her.

“Can’t do what anymore?”

“I can’t love ye. Father James was wrong. This hurts too much and I can’t do it anymore.”

“Katherine, please don’t say that.”

“Why, Niall? At dinner on the day we arrived here, ye told Cairbre your heart was never part of this bargain, but I had already given ye mine. Nothing I do or say seems to convince ye of that. Ye seem determined to punish me for the other women who have hurt ye. I thought I could stand anything, but the pain ye inflict is more than I can bear.”

Niall knew he deserved that. “Katherine, I’m sorry, I was wrong.”

“Aye, ye were,” she agreed, her voice catching, “but this pattern doesn’t change. Ye are always willing to believe the worst about the people who love ye the most. Fingal can leave. I can’t. I have to protect myself. I don’t want to love ye anymore.” Her voice broke with a harsh sob.

Those words cut him deeply. “Katherine, please, ye don’t mean that. Sweetling, I do love ye. I love ye with all my heart. Ye are right, I didn’t want to because I didn’t want to risk getting hurt as I had in the past. I know I have hurt ye and I am sorry. Please, Katherine, forgive me. Tell me I haven’t lost ye,” he said desperately. He tipped her chin up, looking directly into her tear-filled eyes.. The pain he saw rent his heart. “Katherine, I need ye. Please don’t stop loving me.”

She sobbed again, “I don’t think I could stop if I tried, but don’t do this to me again. It will kill me.” She was unable to force back her tears any longer.

He pulled her close again and buried his head in her hair. “Wheesht, lass.”

Chapter 21

January had been unusually cold and stormy but not within his keep, thought Niall. It had been three weeks since he had admitted to himself he was hopelessly in love with his bonny wife, and she with him. He basked in the heat of that love. Several nights ago, under the crystal clear sky that follows a storm, he had led a successful raid against Matheson, replacing most of the livestock that had been slaughtered. However, he had spent the other nights with Katherine. Her passion continued to thrill him. He thought the sight of his delicate wife lying in his arms, cloaked only in her soft honey-colored curls, looking drowsy and replete after their love-making, was the most beautiful sight on earth. The thought made him grin as he stared into the fire in the great hall.

"Ye haven't been listening, have ye?" asked Diarmad.

"Nay, I'm sorry, I was distracted," Niall said, his grin widening. "What were ye saying?"

"I was saying," Diarmad repeated indulgently, "things have been quiet since we increased the number and frequency of patrols on the border. Maybe the show of strength is all it will take."

"Let's hope so," said Niall, but he didn't believe the trouble with Matheson was over.

Moments later he received a message from the watch. A small group of men approached Duncurra under the MacLennan banner.

"Malcolm is returning so soon? That's odd," he said.

Diarmad chuckled. "Perhaps not. When he was here, he spent most of his time in Lady Eithne's company. Maybe he will rid ye of that thorn in your side by marrying her."

"One can only hope," answered Niall.

~ * ~

When Malcolm arrived, it was not to visit Eithne, and he did not bring good news. "Niall, I came as soon as I heard. The daughter of one of my clansmen, who is married to a Matheson, tells me they are planning something at Candlemas or there about. Matheson may be planning a siege on Duncurra."

"A siege?" Niall was incredulous, "in the dead of winter?"

"He believes ye to be weakened and unable to withstand a siege for long."

"Why would he think that?" asked Cairbre. "Duncurra is more secure and has better resources than it has had for several years."

Malcolm shrugged. "Who knows why rash young men do the things they do? The fact is ye can expect him on your doorstep soon."

"Well, we can certainly withstand a siege during winter within Duncurra better than he will be able to survive outside the walls,"

Niall declared.

His commander and captains nodded in agreement.

"I'm sure that is true," agreed Malcolm, "but will ye risk the lives and health of your wife and mother by keeping them here? I thought perhaps it would be best if I escorted them to Brathanead to keep them safely out of harm's way. Once they are secure, I will send a contingent of my men to support ye."

"That is a very kind offer, and certainly if Lady Eithne wishes to, she can return to Brathanead with ye, but Katherine will stay here. A siege on Duncurra would be folly on Matheson's part. I don't believe he will follow through with it."

"Niall, don't make this decision hastily, or based on what ye think another man's rational choices should be. Matheson has already demonstrated his brutality. What do ye think he will do to Katherine if his siege is successful?"

Niall paled. He remembered the threat conveyed after the last raid: *Duncurra next*. The thought of his wife, his pregnant wife, at the hands of Matheson made his blood run cold.

Malcolm assured him, "She will be safe with me, regardless of what happens."

"Don't speak of this to anyone for now," Niall warned. "There are things to discuss and I need to consider all options."

~ * ~

The Laird was preoccupied during dinner, but he didn't share the most recent news with Katherine. After dinner he suggested she retire early, telling her he needed to discuss a few things with his commander and captains. They discussed strategy late into the night. None of them liked the idea of sending Katherine to Brathanead. Furthermore, Niall knew he would have a battle on his hands convincing her to go, but as they discussed it, he became even more certain it was the right choice. He and his guard would escort them with the MacLennan soldiers. When she was safely ensconced at Brathanead, he would return to Duncurra to prepare for a siege.

The next morning, he told Malcolm the plan. "I can understand your desire to see her safely to Brathanead, but do ye think it wise to leave Duncurra with a siege eminent? What will your people do if ye and your elite guard are gone when Matheson attacks?"

"Surely I can take the two days needed to escort Katherine safely to your keep and return."

"Are ye sure enough to risk everything on it? The only information I have is that Matheson has planned something at Candlemas, which is in two days, but we can't be sure he won't attack before then."

Niall realized Malcolm was right. Time was precious and even

taking one day to ride with them was folly. He agreed Katherine and Eithne would travel to Brathanead at dawn, under Malcolm's care. He considered sending Tomas, but he wouldn't be able to send a guard with them and he didn't trust Eithne. Furthermore, he reasoned if Matheson was successful, a boy would be less a target than his wife. Tomas would stay at Duncurra.

Niall waited as long as he could to tell Katherine the plans for her safety.

~ * ~

After the noon meal was finished, Niall asked Edna to take Tomas out of the great hall.

Assuming he intended to talk with his men, Katherine said, "I'll take him. He wants to show me what a skilled horseman he is."

"Nay, Katherine. There is something I wish to discuss with ye."

"Tomas, shall we go find Maura and Nevan?" asked Edna as she ushered the lad outside. Diarmad, Malcolm, Eithne, and Fingal remained at the table, making Katherine instantly wary. Her gaze flitted around the group, but Fingal's was the only face registering the same uneasiness she felt.

When Tomas was out of earshot, Niall took Katherine's hands in his. "Sweetling, we have received word Matheson is planning to lay siege to Duncurra any day now."

"What? Why would he do that?"

"It doesn't matter why. The point is we will be under attack very soon, and I do not want ye here when it starts. I need to protect ye."

"What are ye saying, Niall? Are ye sending me away?"

"My love, I am keeping ye safe. Ye will go with Eithne and Malcolm to Brathanead until the siege is over."

"What about Tomas?"

"Tomas will be safe here."

"Niall, this doesn't make sense. If Tomas will be safe here, I will be safe here. Ye don't even know why Matheson is attacking. Why are ye so sure he will?"

"Katherine," said Niall, frustrated, "apparently, he believes we are vulnerable and he can take Duncurra. I believe we can withstand a siege, but I don't want to risk your safety or that of our bairn."

Katherine felt panic rising. There was something desperately wrong here. This didn't make sense. Even if it were true, she certainly would not leave her home when she should be helping prepare for its defense. She glanced around the table again, looking for support, but she found none. Even Fingal's mouth was set in a grim line. She did not want to argue with Niall in front of an audience, so she leaned toward him and said very softly, "Please, Niall, can we discuss this privately?"

Niall shook his head. “There is nothing to discuss.”

Katherine glanced around the table again and caught Diarmad’s eye. He looked at her and, shaking his head, said, “My lady, ye should not be here during a siege.”

Malcolm said, “Ye will be safe at Brathanead, my dear, and that will give your husband peace of mind. He does not need to be distracted at a time like this. Once ye are safe, I will send men to help defend Duncurra. It will be over soon and ye can return.”

Katherine tried one more time. “Niall, please, can we talk alone?”

“There is nothing to talk about. I have made my decision,” Niall said sternly.

“Katherine, it is obvious Niall loves you,” said Eithne. “He only wishes to keep you safe. Your behavior is very unseemly.”

Katherine ignored her. “Nay, Niall, please don’t make me do this. Don’t send me away. If there is a siege the clan will need me.”

Niall would not relent. “I protect what is mine, Katherine.”

“Then protect me here. This is where I belong.”

Niall had obviously reached his limit. He stood up and said harshly, “I am not arguing with ye about this any longer. I will not risk losing ye and ye will be out of harm’s way at Brathanead. Ye will leave with Malcolm in the morning. Do ye understand me?”

She looked him in the eye and gave the slightest nod of her head, but she felt shattered.

He pulled her into his arms. “Please, Katherine, try to understand. I will come for ye when I have dealt with Matheson and it is safe for ye to return.”

~ * ~

Niall had not informed Fingal of his plans for Katherine in advance and wasn’t surprised when his brother sought him out privately.

“Niall, can I talk to my brother?”

Even after everything that had happened, Niall found it difficult to believe Fingal was not involved in this somehow. “Ye can unless ye are going to tell me that I should not send my wife to safety.”

“I’m not going to say that,” said Fingal with a grin. “I do have trouble believing Matheson intends to lay siege to Duncurra.” Niall arched an eyebrow at him as he continued, “But I agree she should not be here if there is any chance of it at all.”

“So, if ye agree with me, what is your concern?”

“I don’t think ye should send her to Brathanead with Malcolm.”

“Tell me, Fingal, what, in your vast experience, leads ye to draw this conclusion?” Niall asked mockingly.

“Niall, please listen to me. There is something wrong with all of this, and somehow I think Malcolm is involved. He has been subtly agitating from the day we arrived at Brathanead after the wedding. He

was the one who suggested to ye that Katherine and I were somehow in league together against ye. His closeness to Mother has me worried."
"Ye are worried about your mother?" asked Niall, aghast.
"Nay, not about her. I worry that she has sucked Malcolm into something. Niall, I don't trust him anymore and I am worried about ye sending Katherine away with him."
"Where would I send her, then?" asked Niall patronizingly.
"Ye could send her to Chisholm. Fearghas Chisholm would keep her safe. I trust him, and Da trusted him."
Niall sighed. "Little brother, I know ye mean well, but I trust Malcolm, and Da trusted Malcolm, too. Katherine will be safe there and he's ready to take her in the morning. It would take a day or perhaps two to get a message to Fearghas and have him return with a large enough force to protect her. Matheson could already have begun the siege by then. Furthermore, Fearghas Chisholm is a close ally of Matheson's too. If it came to it, I am not sure whose side he would take. Nay, Fingal, it is safest if my wife goes with Malcolm."

Chapter 22

The next morning as they prepared to leave, Malcolm pulled Niall aside. “Stop worrying. Ye have made the right decision and she must accept it. I will protect her well at Brathanead. Even your mother, who rarely agrees with ye on anything, sees this is the best course.”

“I know ye are right. I just hate to send her away so unhappy.”

“Niall, ye know women wield pouting and sulking the way ye and I do a broadsword. Don’t let her manipulate ye into making a decision that could put her in danger. Now bid your lady farewell, or we will not make Brathanead before nightfall.”

As Katherine waited for a stable hand to lead Eachann from the stable, Niall went to her and pulled her into his arms. She returned his embrace and he lifted her chin to look into her eyes. “Katherine, I love ye with all my heart. Ye know that.”

“I love ye, too, and I don’t want to leave.”

“I know, sweetling, but this is the best way to protect ye. I will come for ye when it is safe, I promise.” Looking miserable, she gave another little nod but didn’t speak. Niall kissed her before lifting her onto Eachann’s back. When she had settled herself in the saddle, Malcolm gave the signal for them to leave.

~ * ~

As they rode farther from Duncurra, Katherine adopted the emotionless mask that had served her so well in the past, while Eithne chattered away about inane topics. Katherine tried to be polite without joining the mindless conversation. The snow on the ground forced them to travel at a slow pace, and the sun was well past its zenith when they stopped on MacLennan land to water the horses. They had brought a light meal of bread, cheese, and cold mutton from Duncurra, but Katherine ate very little.

Malcolm encouraged her to eat more. “Lass, that is not enough to keep a bird alive. Ye must have something else. I promised your husband I would take good care of ye. What will he think if ye waste away to nothing under my watch?”

“Aye, Laird, thank you,” she answered, accepting the piece of brown bread and cheese he offered, but she didn’t actually eat any of it.

When they set out again, Eithne rode near the front of the group beside Malcolm. Katherine heard her talking endlessly, but she was too far back to understand the words. She was just happy for a respite from the spiteful woman. After a while, she noticed Malcolm and Eithne had ridden out well in front with many of Malcolm’s men. In fact, they were completely out of sight occasionally. The party rode through a wide mountain pass on a trek skirting close to the mountain

on their left.

Katherine knew the Highlands held many similar passes. When she had first travelled this way as they journeyed to Duncurra, Niall explained such spots were a favorite place for thieves to lay in wait. When riding through these areas, Niall remained alert, moving quickly and quietly, with his men riding close around them. They were on MacLennan land and with six MacLennan soldiers encircling her, she should feel completely safe, but she worried. Maybe it was just Niall's caution making her nervous, but something felt wrong. She tried to push the pace a little in an effort to rejoin those in front.

"We seem to be falling behind. Can we speed up a bit to catch up with Laird MacLennan?" she asked her escort.

One of the MacLennan soldiers said, "There is no need, my lady. Laird MacLennan doesn't wish for you to risk hurting yourself. Besides, they aren't that far ahead. It's just hard to see them because the path bends to the right and the forest is heavy. Ye'll see, they're just around the corner and we'll catch them up soon."

"I will not break if we pick up our pace a bit. I'm sorry, but I don't think they are 'just around the corner' because I can't hear them anymore. Please, I want to catch up to them."

"My lady," the soldier said, his voice thick with irritation, "ye can't hear them because the snow deadens the noise, and I will not risk my laird's ire to indulge your whim."

In spite of her concerns, they continued to hold the same plodding pace. A moment later she did hear horses, only it wasn't Malcolm's party.

Armed men surrounded them and in an instant they were under attack. Although the attackers did not outnumber the MacLennan soldiers, they had far superior skills. Still, she expected to see Malcolm and the rest of the men come riding back to help, but they never did. Before she knew it, the MacLennans capitulated, laying down their weapons.

There was only one thing Katherine could do; she turned Eachann and bolted.

Leaning low over the horse's neck, she rode to the north as fast as she could manage. She heard a horse thundering behind her, but didn't look back. It was barely a moment before the huge black warhorse drew alongside Eachann on her right and someone lifted her off her saddle. The other rider's vise-like arm closed around her, pulling her onto his horse as he slowed the beast.

She screamed, kicked her legs, arched her back, and pushed against him, trying to twist out of his grip, but it was no use.

"Wheesht, lass, I won't hurt ye, but ye'll hurt yourself if ye keep fighting."

She stopped struggling for a moment. “Please let me go. I don’t have anything valuable, and the MacLennans have surrendered. Please just let me go.”

“Now, lass, my conscience wouldn’t allow me to let as sweet a thing as ye ride out unprotected. Ye might be set upon by brigands,” he said with a chuckle. “Beside which, I’m not interested in the MacLennans. Ye are the prize I seek.” At this pronouncement, Katherine renewed her struggle to twist free. He held her with both arms, and with his left leg, trapped her legs against the horse. He spoke in a more serious tone. “Wheesht. I don’t want to bind ye, but I will if I have to. I will not risk ye hurting yourself,” he grunted as she managed to dig an elbow into his stomach, “or me.” He tightened his grip, “Which is it to be?”

Katherine stilled. She was terrified. Finally she asked, “Who are you and what do you want with me?”

He released her legs, but he still kept one arm firmly clamped around her waist. He nudged the black into a trot towards Eachann. “My lady, I am Tadhg Matheson, laird of Clan Matheson. Am I right in assuming ye are Niall MacIan’s wife?” She gave a little nod. “Then, my lady, what I want is for ye to be my guest at Cnocreidh.” By this time he had ridden close enough to the brown gelding to take hold of the reins. Then he turned both horses back in the direction from which they had just ridden.

Katherine turned her head so she could look him in the face. “My husband will kill you,” she said, with more bravado than she felt.

He smiled at her and said mockingly, “And just where is he, lass? If ye were my wife I wouldn’t trust a group of cowardly MacLennans to see to your safety.”

Tears threatened and she looked away. “He thought he was keeping me safe,” she said defensively, adding, “Laird MacLennan is one of his oldest friends, and Niall trusts him.”

“Well, as it appears Laird MacIan’s trust was misplaced. His oldest friend has abandoned ye.”

She knew he was right. If Malcolm and his other men were ‘just around the corner’ as her escort had said, they should have heard the attack and ridden back.

She bowed her head, feeling completely defeated. “Why do ye want me?”

“Lass, have ye never seen your reflection? There are many reasons a man would want ye.”

She snapped her head around in fear and he quit teasing.

“Ye are in no danger, I swear. I am going to take ye to my home and keep ye safely there until I can get your hard-headed husband to stop raiding my holding.”

By this time they were back at the scene of the ambush. Her MacLennan escort had been relieved of their weapons and sat on the ground bound at the wrists and ankles. The Matheson warriors sat on their mounts, waiting for their laird to return. One of them asked, "What do ye want us to do with them, Laird?"

"Take the horses. We'll leave the cowards trussed. I expect MacLennan will send someone for them, but one never knows what a cur will do. Just in case, leave a dagger. Maybe they will manage to free themselves before Laird MacIan can kill them. Oh, and lads, one last thing," he said, addressing the MacLennan soldiers. "Please make sure Niall MacIan gets this message. His lovely wife will be my honored guest at Cnocreidh until he is willing to discuss a truce." Then he signaled his men to leave and the Matheson warriors rode fast and hard to the northwest with seven new horses and Katherine MacIan.

He might consider her "his guest," but she knew that was a farce. After her initial fight he had loosened his grip on her. She suspected that he believed she had resigned herself to the situation. He was mistaken. If he thought she would make this easy for him, he had another think coming.

She might not be able to escape easily, but she could make him miserable, so she launched a more insidious attack. She fidgeted and twisted on his lap, forcing him to constantly readjust in order to maintain balance. Occasionally she bumped his chin with her head, knocking his head backwards, or dug her sharp elbows into his ribs. Each time she issued a polite, sweet apology. Katherine was prepared to make him suffer the whole journey, but before long he must have realized these were not accidents. "Enough! Ye will sit still," he commanded, clamping an arm around her waist and once again pulling her firmly against his chest.

Having effectively curtailed her attack, she was left with nothing to do but endure the ride and think. She tried to fit all the pieces together. She could not find an explanation for Malcolm's abandonment or the fact that her MacLennan escorts had barely raised a sword. Laird Matheson had said something about getting Niall to stop raiding, but it was Matheson who kept harassing the MacIans. Nothing made sense. She needed Niall. She was afraid and she needed to escape, but as long as Laird Matheson held her on horseback, she couldn't. She would have to find an excuse to get down and get away.

~ * ~

Tadhg had hoped if they pushed, they would reach Cnocreidh before sunset, but when darkness fell, they were still about an hour's ride away. However, the temperature dropped and a bitter cold wind whipped up. He had no intention of sleeping on the frozen ground

with this particular hostage. The moon was bright and they rode over familiar terrain well within Matheson territory, so he pushed on at a slower pace.

After hours of silence from her, his hostage turned her head and, looking up at him, said, “Laird Matheson—”

“Please call me Tadhg.” He looked at her for a moment. Even in the low light, the fear he saw in her eyes concerned him.

“I would rather not,” she said.

He chuckled. “Well, lass, if ye want me to answer, ye will have to.”

Ignoring him, she asked, “Will it be much longer?”

“Perhaps an hour,” he answered.

“Well, I...um...I need some privacy,” she said shyly, bowing her head and looking away.

He had expected this and signaled for his men to halt. He lifted her chin and gently turned her head so he could look her squarely in the eyes. “I will allow ye to have some privacy, but first answer me this. Do ye have any idea where ye are?”

She looked back at him, apparently confused, and by way of clarification he asked bluntly, “In which direction would ye go to get back to Duncurra?”

As realization dawned on her, he saw tears fill her eyes. She tried to blink them back and said, “I don’t know.”

“I didn’t think so. I know ye are scared, and I know ye want to go home, but running away from me would put ye in danger and I can’t allow that.”

“And I’m not in danger with you?” she challenged.

“Nay, ye are not,” he said firmly. “But I warn ye, if ye try to escape, I will find ye. This is my land and tracking ye through snow will not be difficult. Furthermore, if I have to traipse through these frigid, snowy woods tonight searching, when I do find ye, I will bind ye until we reach Cnocreidh. I will not let ye put yourself at risk. Do I make myself clear?”

Still fighting tears, she nodded before looking away. He hated threatening her but knew it was necessary. He added more gently, “Ye will get through this and I will get ye back to your husband unharmed.” He dismounted and lifted her to the ground, motioning for her to go into the woods. As she walked away he added, “One more thing, lass.” She looked back at him and he said with a wink, “He won’t kill me.”

~ * ~

They did arrive at Cnocreidh within the hour, and Katherine felt utter despair set in. The massive fortress appeared to be as impenetrable as Duncurra. It stood on the top of a hill with a huge

swath around it cleared of trees, making it impossible to approach or leave without being seen. Not only that, but two thick, fortified walls surrounded it, an inner curtain wall enclosing the keep, and a second wall encircling the village around it. They entered through a manned barbican set in the outer wall; the heavy portcullis opened as they approached. The inner curtain wall appeared to be higher and thicker than the outer wall and she could see sentries on the top. They crossed through another manned barbican and portcullis to reach the enormous keep. It looked as if all of Duncurra would have fit within the central section of Cnocreidh, between its four massive towers. Katherine thought dismally that finding her way out of the keep alone would be a challenge. Escaping the walls appeared to be nearly impossible.

"Welcome to Cnocreidh," Tadhg said as they entered the courtyard. He dismounted, lifted her to the ground, and handed his horse to a stablehand. Taking Katherine's elbow, he led her to his keep and through the doors into the great hall. Fires roared in two hearths and the flurry of activity suggested the evening meal was nearly ready. As they walked in, he called to an older woman, saying, "Elspet, our visitor, Lady Katherine MacIan, has arrived. Turning to Katherine, he said, "Elspet manages the staff here."

He spoke quietly to Elspet for a moment. Although Katherine had ridden in his lap for hours, she hadn't actually gotten a good look at him until now. He had dark hair and green eyes, and while he stood as tall as Niall, she thought he was perhaps less broad through the shoulders. However, he had crushed her against him long enough for her to know he had the same powerful muscles. He hadn't been unkind to her, and he swore to her she was in no danger, but her heart ached for home.

~ * ~

When he finished speaking with Elspet, Tadhg turned back to Katherine. "I will show ye to your chamber. I have arranged for ye to have a hot bath, and dinner will be brought up. I suspect ye could use some rest."

She nodded, following him up the stairs to a well-appointed fourth floor chamber. A fire crackled in the hearth and the room was warm and inviting. She walked in, standing there for a moment with her back to him. Tadhg thought she looked very small and fragile compared to the virago he had pulled off her horse earlier. Even though he had warned her about the danger of escaping, he suspected she had still hoped to try until they rode into view of Cnocreidh. At that moment he had felt her shoulders droop. Now she looked very alone and afraid. Even though he was the cause of her current consternation, he wanted to comfort her.

“Lady Katherine, I know none of this is your doing. The difficulties between the Mathesons and MacIans go back many years, and I’m sorry ye have become a pawn. I want ye to be comfortable here. I would rather not lock ye in this room.” She turned sharply to look at him and the fear he saw in her eyes disturbed him. “If ye will agree not to take one step out of this keep unless I give ye leave and someone accompanies ye, I will let ye have your freedom within it. Will ye promise?”

She looked down. It was clear she didn’t want him to lock her in. He watched as she seemed to wage an internal battle. Finally, barely above a whisper, she said, “Nay. I will not promise to stay. If an opportunity arises to escape, I will take it.”

“Damnation, there is no way for ye to escape Cnocreidh, surely ye realize that? Even if ye did manage to escape to the woods without someone seeing you, it is winter and ye have no idea how to get back to Duncurra. Ye would be in terrible danger alone. This will be over soon, don’t make me treat ye like a prisoner.”

She looked him squarely in the eye, and once again he saw the spirit and determination he had originally encountered. She said, “I am a prisoner and I won’t make that promise. If I have the chance, I will return to my husband.”

Elspet arrived, followed by servants carrying a tub and buckets of hot water.

Tadhg shook his head in frustration. “As ye wish, my lady.” Before leaving he turned to Elspet, saying coldly, “Lock her in. She is not to leave this room without my permission and an escort.” He left.

~ * ~

Katherine’s bag of belongings had been tied to her saddle, and Elspet brought it to her while she bathed. “The laird thought it would be better if ye didn’t have a weapon,” the woman said. “He asked me to tell ye he will return it to ye when ye leave.”

“Of course he did,” replied Katherine in frustration, remembering she had packed her father’s jeweled dagger. She rose from the tub and wrapped herself in the soft linen towel Elspet held for her. She dried, changed into a clean *léine,* and sat by the fire combing her wet hair.

Servants removed the tub while Elspet tidied up before laying the meal on a small table. Katherine thanked her, but didn’t make any attempt to eat it. “My lady, please eat something,” Elspet said gently.

“I will,” replied Katherine, “in a bit.”

“Is there anything else ye need?” Elspet asked.

Katherine looked around, really taking in the room for the first time. It was small, but comfortably furnished. She shook her head and said, “Nay, thank you.”

Elspet opened the chamber door to leave and said, “I’m sorry, my

lady, I have to lock the door."

"I understand," said Katherine sadly. "Would you answer a question before you go?"

"If I can."

"When we entered the hall this evening, Laird Matheson said to you, 'our visitor has arrived.' When he left today, how did he know he would be coming back with me?"

"I'm sorry, my lady, that is something ye will have to ask the laird. Is there anything else?"

"Nay, thank ye."

Elspet left, locking the door behind her. Katherine made a half-hearted attempt at eating the food set out for her, but she was exhausted, her head ached, and she felt ill. She finally blew out the candles before curling up in bed. It was warm and comfortable, but she would rather be sleeping on the cold ground in Niall's arms than without him anywhere else. As she lay there, unable to sleep in spite of her fatigue, she once again tried to put the pieces together.

She became more and more certain Malcolm had abandoned her. Laird Matheson had said, "Our visitor has arrived." *He knew I would be traveling to Brathanead and intended to capture me*. That's where things fell apart for her. Malcolm had only arrived at Duncurra two nights ago. Niall had made the decision to send her to Brathanead yesterday afternoon. How could Matheson have known?

Based on the conversation Tomas overheard, there had been at least two people at Duncurra who were conspiring against Niall, one of whom expected to gain Duncurra for himself. Niall was right, that would appear to point to Fingal. He was among the first to know she would be traveling to Brathanead, but she would not believe he had betrayed Niall in this manner.

This puzzle had too many missing pieces. Her head ached worse the longer she thought about it, but she was more firmly convinced than ever Laird Matheson could fill in some of the blanks. She resolved to try to speak with him in the morning, then finally gave in to her exhaustion.

~ * ~

When Elspet knocked gently on the chamber door, Katherine was dressed and sitting in a chair by the hearth. Elspet bustled happily into the chamber saying, "Good morning, my lady, are ye well? It is good to see ye are already up and dressed."

"Good morning, Elspet. I am quite well, thank you," answered Katherine automatically.

"I've brought ye a nice hearty breakfast, my lady." Her beaming smile dimmed when she saw the uneaten dinner from last night still on the table. "What was he thinking?" she grumbled under her breath.

Choosing to ignore the comment, Katherine said, “Elspet, I need to speak to Laird Matheson as soon as possible. Please, can you ask if he will see me?”

She looked at Katherine and observed bluntly, “My lady, ye don’t look ‘quite well.’ Ye didn’t eat a thing and I’m guessing ye haven’t eaten since sometime yesterday afternoon. What’s more, ye look even more pallid and drawn than ye did last night.”

“Please, I need to speak with your laird.”

“Laird Matheson will be livid if he sees ye looking as ye do, and finds out ye haven’t eaten. I think it would be a very good idea for ye to break your fast before I tell him ye wish to see him.”

Katherine sighed and shook her head with an air of defeat. “You are right, I don’t feel well and I cannot eat right now. I will eat something later, I promise. However, I must speak with Laird Matheson. Please, will you ask if he’ll see me?”

Elspet stared at her for a moment. Shaking her head in frustration, she responded, “I will give your message to my laird, but please, lass, ye need to eat something. I’ll check back in on ye soon. Is there anything else ye need before I go?”

“Nay, thank you, Elspet.”

The woman left, taking Katherine’s uneaten dinner, and once again locked her in.

Chapter 23

After Katherine left Niall spent the day preparing for the siege. He sent messages to outlying farms so as many people and as much livestock as possible could be moved to Duncurra for safety. He did everything possible to fortify his stronghold, driving himself well into the night, until Diarmad finally convinced him to rest briefly. When he lay down, he fell into an exhausted sleep, but the image of Katherine's face as she begged him to let her stay haunted his dreams. When he woke after only a few hours, he rose and continued preparing for the imminent siege. Even though he believed sending Katherine to Brathanead was the right thing to do, after his few restless hours of sleep, he couldn't shake the feeling he had failed her.

That evening one of his men-at-arms approached, saying "Laird, the watch reports there is a MacLennan messenger riding hard toward Duncurra."

This could not be good news. Perhaps Malcolm had learned additional information about Matheson's movements. He called for Diarmad, Alan, and Cairbre to join him in the great hall, where preparations were well underway for the evening meal. When the messenger arrived, Niall received him immediately. The messenger's news stunned everyone.

"My wife was kidnapped by Matheson?" Niall roared. "Tell me now the men guarding her were killed, because I swear they will die at my hand if they weren't."

"Laird MacLennan said Matheson attacked with an overwhelming force. Most of the MacLennan soldiers fell under the sword or were gravely injured. Laird MacLennan himself was seriously injured. He begs your forgiveness and swears he will help ye seek vengeance. MacLennan soldiers will be arriving to support ye tomorrow."

"Did Matheson also take Lady Eithne?" Diarmad asked.

"My laird said Laird Matheson only took Lady Katherine. Apparently she was bound, gagged, and thrown across Matheson's lap." The messenger began to look very uncomfortable.

"Does he intend to ransom her?" Niall asked, his panic over Katherine rising.

"The laird said Matheson didn't mention a ransom, but—"

"But what? What else is there?"

"I'm sorry, Laird. Apparently, Laird Matheson said to tell ye—if ye still wanted your wife when he was done with her—ye could come to Cnocreidh and beg for her."

The message had its desired effect. Niall exploded in rage. "I will raze Cnocreidh!" he roared. "We leave at first light." Turning back to the messenger, he said, "Matheson has never attacked the

MacLennans; he must have known Katherine was with them."

"Aye, he did. He told Laird MacLennan he had 'received an invitation' from Duncurra."

This statement confirmed Niall's suspicions. Consumed with fury, in a deadly calm voice he said to Cairbre, "Bring Fingal to me now."

"Aye, Laird," answered Cairbre, but before he left, he said, "Laird, I cannot believe Fingal would betray ye."

"I don't care what ye believe. It can only be him. He would not only need to see me dead, he would need to eliminate Katherine and the bairn as well to inherit Duncurra. Get him now!"

Cairbre nodded and left.

Niall had never felt this kind of rage. He saw the concerned glances passed between Alan and Diarmad. "What?" he demanded.

Just as Cairbre had, Alan tried to reason with him, pleading for caution, "Laird, he is your brother, at least hear him."

"Have no fear, Alan, I will hear his confession before I kill him."

"Laird, I'm sending Caolin to fetch Father Colm," said Diarmad, motioning the women out of the hall.

Niall snorted in disgust. "If ye think anyone will stop me from seeking justice, ye are wrong, Diarmad."

Father Colm arrived at the great hall just as Cairbre returned with Fingal. Fingal stopped short, looking wary and cautious. "What has happened?" he asked.

"I think ye know," answered Niall, barely able to contain his wrath.

"Niall, I don't understand. Please tell me what's wrong."

"Ye will address me as laird, for ye don't have the right to call me brother anymore," snarled Niall. "Who did ye send to Matheson?"

"Laird, I sent no one to Matheson, I've had no contact with him."

"Stop lying! Ye're the only one who could have told him Katherine was on her way to Brathanead—the only one with a motive for wanting both of us dead!"

Clearly alarmed, Fingal took a step back. "I am not lying to ye, Laird. For the love of God, tell me what's happened."

Through clenched teeth, Niall said, "Matheson attacked with an overwhelming force as Malcolm was escorting Katherine to Brathanead."

Fingal blanched at his words. "Is she all right?"

Niall continued as if he hadn't heard Fingal. "Most of Malcolm's men were killed or injured. Even Malcolm himself was seriously injured. Matheson kidnapped Katherine and apparently does not intend to ransom her." Niall grabbed Fingal by the shoulders and bellowed, "Tell me what ye know, now, or I will tear ye limb from limb!"

“I swear to ye, on our father’s soul, I had nothing to do with this. I would never harm either of ye, Niall, I swear it.”

Niall threw him to the floor. Fingal was back on his feet in an instant, but Father Colm stepped between them. “Get out of my way, Father,” demanded Niall.

Without flinching, Father Colm looked Niall squarely in the eye and said, “Laird, I will not let ye do something in anger ye will regret. Ye do not have proof your brother betrayed ye, and ye know as well as I do ye are angrier with yourself for not escorting her than ye are with anyone else. Ye need to focus on getting Lady Katherine back. Vengeance will wait.”

Father Colm looked every inch a warrior in that moment, so Niall had no doubt he would have to battle the old priest before laying a hand on Fingal. Furthermore, what the priest said was true. “Ye are right, Father,” Niall said, glaring at Fingal. “I have no proof, and nothing can interfere with getting Katherine back. However, I will find proof of your perfidy, brother, then I *will* kill ye.”

Addressing Diarmad and his two captains, the laird said, “We will leave only a few men here to secure Duncurra. Everyone else should prepare to ride to Cnocreidh at first light.” To the MacLennan messenger, Niall said, “Eat, rest, and return to your laird. Tell him I will gladly accept the support he offers, and I will have vengeance on Matheson.” Finally, turning back to Fingal, Niall said with rancor, “Ye will stay here. I don’t trust ye to protect your inheritance, so ye are relieved of all duties and confined to the keep.” With that, he strode out of the hall, followed by Diarmad, Alan, and Cairbre.

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Fingal felt angry and hurt, but more than anything else, he was confused. How could this have happened? He agreed with Niall, Matheson had to have known Katherine travelled with Malcolm in order to have ambushed him, defeating him so soundly. He looked at Father Colm and said sincerely, “Father, nothing that’s happened makes sense. If something happens to Katherine, I am the only person who stands to inherit Duncurra, but I swear, I did not betray my brother.” Dejectedly he sat in a chair by the hearth.

Father Colm considered him for a moment before joining him. “I believe ye. Unfortunately, it is difficult to identify anyone else with a strong motive. If it isn’t ye, the only thing that makes sense is that whoever is behind this expects to conquer Duncurra, not inherit it.”

“That is the only answer I can see, as well,” said Fingal, “but the conspirator was here on the Epiphany and Matheson certainly was not. I didn’t want to, but I can’t help but think Malcolm is involved. I worried about Niall’s decision to send Katherine with him, but Malcolm was our father’s dearest friend. He has truly always been like

an uncle to us. My distrust has more to do with my mother's involvement with Malcolm than anything else."

"Ye seem to have very little affection for your mother," observed Father Colm.

"Truthfully, Father, she wasn't really a mother to either of us. She went to court for the first time when I was five. Eventually she chose to live there permanently."

"Without your father?"

"Our father loved the Highlands, but my mother didn't, and after I was born, she was never able to carry another bairn to term. I think the fact that she lost so many other pregnancies trying to give him more children made him want to do whatever it took to make her happy, so he let her stay there." Fingal shook his head at the memories. "He turned a blind eye to everything she did, and while she was there, she practically destroyed this clan single-handedly."

"How did she manage that?" asked Father Colm.

"She acquired a massive debt, the true magnitude of which was only discovered after my father's death. The clan was on the brink of ruin. Niall was forced to seek help from King David, who provided a solution, in the form of marriage to a Lowland heiress."

"The Lady Katherine?"

"Aye."

The old priest smiled and said, "I would hardly call that a sacrifice."

Fingal smiled too. "There would be many who would agree with ye, Father, but for Niall, at the time, it was. Years ago the woman he intended to marry betrayed him. The entire clan witnessed her deception and his heartache. He vowed never to marry. However, for the sake of the clan, he did marry Katherine, paid off all the debts, and is trying to help the clan not only survive, but to prosper."

"That sounds an awful lot like admiration from someone who is supposedly seeking his brother's downfall."

Fingal smiled, but he felt profoundly sad. He had just lost the only thing that ever mattered to him. They both sat silently in contemplation for several minutes. Then Father Colm said, "Based on what Tomas overheard, the conspirator expects he will gain Duncurra for himself, but someone else will kill Niall. Could Laird Matheson be an accomplice?"

"I admit it has been a number of years since I have had any close association with him, but this is completely out of character. He is one of the wealthiest lairds in the Highlands and has never been covetous of others," said Fingal.

"Men do change," offered Father Colm.

"Perhaps, but I can't see what Tadhg could hope to gain by

helping someone bring Niall down."

"Then, other than ye, who would have a reason to destroy Laird MacIan? Does he have any enemies?"

"Father, Niall has a temper, but with one notable exception," Fingal said dryly, motioning to himself, "he usually does not release his anger without serious cause. He is a force to be reckoned with, but he is also generally considered to be fair—much more so than our father was."

"Perhaps someone from Katherine's past? A family member or a disappointed suitor?"

Fingal snorted. "Her only family was a merciless uncle who damn near beat her to death, and he made sure she had no suitors."

Father Colm looked askance.

"Tis true. Nay, her uncle benefitted by her marriage to Niall. He was happy enough. Frankly, Katherine lost the most, but there was no one to champion her."

Father Colm nodded, saying, "Fingal, lad, I can understand why the laird thinks ye are behind this. Ye have argued against it being anyone else but ye."

Fingal answered wryly, "Aye, Father, even I am beginning to suspect me. The fact is my brother is a good man, and well respected. The only person I know who neither likes nor respects Niall is my mother."

"If there is so little fondness between them, why did she leave court and return to Duncurra?"

"After Niall resolved all the debt she accrued, he made it clear she was no longer to be extended credit. He gave her an annual stipend on which to live, but she arrived here after spending the lot in a few months."

"Could she be the one behind this?"

"Not alone. She has become very close to Malcolm, and in recent months he has not only stirred discord between us, he has done the same between Niall and Katherine."

"He was here at the Epiphany. It could have been Malcolm who Tomas overheard."

Fingal thought for a moment before saying, "Tomas said one of the people he overheard said something about 'pretending to be something for too long' and he was 'sorry he wouldn't be the one to kill Niall.' That could certainly be Malcolm, if the loving uncle role was just an act. Malcolm could have been behind the raids and the kidnapping. It was his idea to take Katherine to Brathanead in the first place. Instigating a war with Matheson would weaken us sufficiently to allow Malcolm to successfully lay siege to Duncurra, and could certainly get Niall killed."

Fingal rose to his feet, saying, “Holy Mother of God, Niall told the MacLennan messenger he would ‘gladly accept the support’ Malcolm will send. Niall is only leaving a handful of men here. Malcolm could ride in with an army and be welcomed. I have to find Niall and tell him.”

“Wait,” cautioned Father Colm, putting a hand on Fingal’s shoulder. “Your brother is furious with ye and is not likely to graciously hear accusations against an old and trusted friend.”

“Father, I can’t let Niall ride off and leave Duncurra vulnerable to a siege.”

“Lad, if ye go to him now with these suspicions, he is likely to separate your head from your shoulders before ye can tell him anything. Can ye close Duncurra after he leaves, and defend a siege until he returns?”

“Duncurra can be defended for a short time with a small number of men. Now that Niall doesn’t trust me, it is unlikely the men left behind will follow my orders, particularly if they think the arriving army is Niall’s ally.”

“Is there someone else who ye trust from whom ye can seek help?”

“Laird Chisholm. I could reach his keep in a few hours, but if Niall finds out I’ve left, he will believe the worst.”

“If ye don’t, ye risk losing everything ye hold dear.”

Fingal knew the old priest was right. In the bustle of activity surrounding the preparations to leave the next morning, as well as the continued effort to bring as many of the clan as possible behind the walls at Duncurra, Fingal slipped out without notice. He rode as fast as was safe in the dark and reached Currancreag, the Chisholm stronghold, shortly after midnight.

Chapter 24

Laird Matheson returned from the hunt in the early evening. They had been successful and he was in a particularly good mood. Looking extremely anxious, Elspet approached him as he entered the courtyard.

"How is our stubborn visitor today?" he asked.

"Laird, I think ye have an unexpected problem on your hands. I tried to find ye so I could tell ye early this morning, but ye had already left."

Tadhg raised an eyebrow at her. "Care to enlighten me now?"

"Why don't men ever stop to think about the consequences of their actions? She is scared and has eaten almost nothing. This kind of upset could be disastrous," she said, wringing her hands.

"Elspet, what are ye talking about?"

"Laird, I suspect your visitor is with child."

Laird Matheson swore loudly and, rubbing his forehead, asked, "What makes ye think that?"

"I helped her bathe last night, and although she is very slender, her belly is rounding. I thought it possible, but this morning she seemed ill and unable to eat, which isn't unusual if she is expecting."

"Damnation. MacIan might kill me. Hell, I'd kill me, if I were him."

"Laird, an upset the likes of this one could cause a lass to miscarry."

"God's mercy, Elspet, I know that."

"Good. I'm glad to see ye are sufficiently worried, because I've done something ye may not like."

"What have ye done?" he asked warily.

"Laird, I know ye ordered me to keep her locked in her chamber unless ye gave permission for her to leave, and I have never defied an order, but I reasoned that when ye gave that order, ye didn't know about her condition. Laird, I was worried about her, and no matter how good your intentions were, if something happens to that lass or her bairn, well, there is no telling what Laird MacIan would do."

"Ye didn't keep her locked up?" Tadhg asked, but the relief was evident in his voice.

"Nay, Laird, I didn't," said Elspet, trying to appear contrite. "But I followed half the order. I told Hamish ye ordered that Lady MacIan should have an escort ere she left her chamber, and he has been by her side all day, as ye required."

"Where is she now?" he asked wearily.

"I thought it best to keep her distracted. She had needlework packed in her bag. I gave her a few things she needed, so she spent

most of the day in the great hall working on it. She is clearly uneasy still, but much less so than last night. Laird, she asked to speak with ye as soon as ye returned."

"I will see her now," he said, walking past Elspet to enter the keep. Then stopped and turned back to her. "Elspet, does Hamish know Lady Katherine did not have my permission to leave her chamber?"

"Nay, Laird, I didn't mention that bit. I—ah—only told him ye wished her to be escorted."

Tadhg chuckled, "And so I did."

He continued walking towards the keep but Elspet stopped him again. "There is one more thing ye should know." At his expectant look, she went on, "It's a terrible thing, really. I feel sorry for the wee lass, but while she was bathing last night, I noticed Lady Katherine's back is covered with scars from a whip."

"He beats her?" Tadhg asked, sickened by the thought.

"I couldn't say, Laird. While I don't think anyone has beaten her recently, some of her scars aren't terribly old. I just thought ye should know."

He nodded and continued on into the great hall in search of Lady Katherine. He found her as Elspet had said, sitting by the hearth, her needlework in her hands.

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As Laird Matheson approached, Katherine clearly saw the concern in his expression. "My lady, I understand ye wished to speak with me, but I need ask ye something first. Elspet tells me ye have scars on your back. Does MacIan beat ye?"

"Oh, by all the saints, of course not. Niall would never hurt me. My Uncle Ambrose gave me those scars."

"Ambrose Ruthven?"

"Aye."

"If I ever see him again, I may have to kill him."

"Kill him over whipping his niece, who you kidnapped? I think if your house is made of glass, you'd best not throw stones."

Tadhg threw his head back and laughed. "Ye are a feisty bit of goods, my lady."

When he had stopped laughing, Katherine said, "Laird Matheson, I need to talk to you about, this—this whole situation."

"Which situation, specifically?" he asked, sobering. "Your husband's raids on my land, my taking ye as a hostage, or the fact that ye let me lock an expectant mother up like a prisoner?"

Shocked, Katherine snapped her head up at his last comment.

"Elspet is very observant," Tadhg said by way of explanation.

"Well, I am a prisoner, so I don't see how your last point is

relevant, and I haven't exactly been locked up, but it is the first two that concern me. Laird Matheson—"

Exasperated he said, "Please, call me Tadhg."

Katherine ignored him and continued, "There is something very wrong. My husband did not instigate the raids on your land. He was only retaliating for raids against us."

"Lass, I know ye would like to believe—"

"Nay, hear me out. He did *not* start the raids. This last one was in response to a brutal attack on our border. The animals weren't stolen, they were slaughtered, dwellings were burned, and three clansmen were killed the day after Epiphany."

"And he thinks I did that?"

"Every indication was that ye did."

"That is ludicrous," he said, his ire rising. "That kind of destruction serves no purpose. He has raided me numerous times over the last year. I didn't retaliate last winter or spring because I had heard of the MacIan's financial troubles. I wasn't going to steal food from their mouths. The fact is, I have only led one raid on MacIan lands and it was this past fall, well after their financial issues had been solved." Tadhg gave her a pointed look and continued, "and they were still raiding my land."

"If ye weren't behind the raids, who was and why?"

"I can only guess someone wanted to provoke your husband into attacking me."

"What would be gained by that?"

"I'm not sure. I can certainly withstand such an attack. The only thing it would really do is weaken the MacIans."

"But Niall knew that. He wasn't considering attacking ye. We received word ye were planning to lay siege to Duncurra."

"That is, without a doubt, the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. I have no intention of laying siege to Duncurra," Tadhg said vehemently. "I have no interest in Duncurra at all. Who told ye this?"

"Two days ago, Laird MacLennan arrived at Duncurra and told Niall an attack from ye was imminent. He said ye were planning to lay siege close to Candlemas, and convinced Niall I would be safer at Brathanead."

"He said Candlemas? Are ye sure?

"Aye."

"And when did Niall make the decision for ye to travel to Brathanead?"

"Two days ago, when Malcolm came with news of the siege."

"Katherine, I found out more than a week ago ye would be traveling to Brathanead yesterday."

"That is not possible. As I said, Niall only decided after Malcolm

came, two days ago. I left with Laird MacLennan yesterday morning. How could ye have known for a week?"

"The wife of one of my clansmen is a MacLennan. She returned from visiting her sister with news that Laird MacLennan was having a huge feast for Candlemas and ye would be accompanying Lady MacIan."

"What? I would not go to Brathanead for a celebration without Niall. In fact, I would never have willingly accompanied Eithne anywhere alone. I didn't want to this time, but Niall insisted because he was afraid for my safety. Malcolm convinced him not to escort me by telling him your attack could come at any time, so he shouldn't risk being away from Duncurra even for a day."

"Well, that was a wise move on Laird MacLennan's part if he wanted me to kidnap ye. I never would have attempted it if Niall and his guard were escorting ye. I have no doubt he would die protecting ye. But, my lady, the MacLennans practically presented ye as a gift."

Katherine frowned at him. "If Niall led an attack on ye, it would leave Duncurra less well protected, wouldn't it?"

"Aye, probably dangerously so."

"Allowing someone else to successfully lay siege?"

"Aye."

"Then it has to be Malcolm at the root of this. He has been behind the raids against us, but he made it look as if it were ye. He has tried over and over to goad Niall into attacking ye, and Niall wouldn't. He knew it would critically weaken him. So Malcolm did the one thing that was sure to cause my husband to attack. He made it easy for ye to capture me. If he could get Niall to attack ye, he can take Duncurra. That explains what Tomas overheard."

"Tomas?"

"Our foster son," said Katherine. She told Tadhg about the whispered conversation in the stairwell. "Niall suspected Fingal. It sounded as if the person talking intended to inherit Duncurra."

"Unless things have changed drastically, Fingal would never have plotted against Niall. Fingal all but worshipped him. Besides, ye are expecting, are ye not?"

"Aye, but at that time we hadn't told anyone yet—Fingal didn't know. It had to be Malcolm, and he meant to seize Duncurra, not inherit it."

As Tadhg processed this information, he realized its full implication. "If Malcolm MacLennan is behind this, the message Niall will receive today is not likely to be the one I sent, asking to discuss a truce. He will ride on Cnocreidh to rescue ye, leaving Duncurra vulnerable."

Katherine went ashen. "Niall is expecting Laird MacLennan to

send men to Duncurra. They won't be seen as a threat until it's too late."

Tadhg leapt into action. He called to Hamish, who was in the hall a discreet distance away. He explained the situation and gave orders to prepare a large contingent of men to leave at first light. "Lady Katherine, I have to ride on Duncurra before your husband has the chance to leave."

"But he will think ye are attacking. The battle will be underway before ye can get to him. Even if ye ride under the white flag, I doubt he will believe ye."

"I have to try. I refuse to let MacLennan get away with this," Tadhg said angrily.

"Niall will believe ye if I ride with ye. He will not attack if I am there," Katherine said.

"Absolutely not," Tadhg said, and stalked away to prepare.

God save me from over-protective men. Oh, and while ye are at it, please, God, save them from each other.

Chapter 25

Fingal knew Fearghas Chisholm and his wife Ena had been asleep for hours, but he told the guard this couldn't wait. "Damnation, Andrew, ye know I wouldn't insist on waking Laird Chisholm if it wasn't extremely urgent."

"Fingal, ye are generally level-headed, and the laird and lady are fond of ye, but by all that's holy man, they won't be happy if they find out this could have waited until morning."

"I promise ye, Andrew, it can't wait. I have to talk to the laird right now."

"All right, wait there by the hearth and I will get him."

In just a few minutes, both Fearghas and Ena greeted Fingal in the hall.

"My lady, I am so sorry, ye needn't have come down," Fingal said as she embraced him.

"I tried to tell her morning would be soon enough to greet ye, Fingal, but that battle was lost the moment she heard it was ye."

"If either of ye think I could go back to sleep, worried about what has brought Fingal here in the middle of a bitter winter night, ye are daft."

Fingal smiled at her warmly; she was the closest thing to a real mother he had ever had. "Ye look like the devil has been riding on your heels, lad, what's happened?"

The older couple listened as Fingal laid out the whole story for them. Fearghas agreed it was very unlike Tadhg Matheson to raid without provocation. "Now, I wouldn't put kidnapping a bonny lass past him," Fearghas added with a chuckle.

"I'm not even sure he has Katherine," said Fingal. "If Malcolm is behind this, the abduction could be a ruse as well, simply meant to draw Niall out of Duncurra."

"Ye could be right about it all, lad. Malcolm MacLennan has always been an ambitious man, but not one to take risks. If he had his eyes on Duncurra, he would want to make sure the conquest would be easy."

"Fingal *could* be right? Do you doubt him at all? Malcolm MacLennan has never been trustworthy, and neither has Eithne" said Ena indignantly.

"Ena," Fearghas said, "Don't start that, she is the lad's mother, after all."

"He may as well know, Fearghas." Fearghas shook his head in resignation as Ena continued, "Ye know Eithne was married to one of Fearghas' younger brothers and she lived here after her husband died in battle."

"Aye, I remember, ye told me that when I was a lad."

"Well, she was the most unpleasant, demanding, and embarrassingly indiscreet woman I had ever had to deal with. She threw herself at any man who would have her, regardless of whether he was married or not. She even flirted shamelessly with Fearghas. It doesn't surprise me she has her eyes on Malcolm MacLennan now. She cozied up to him any chance she could, even back then. He was married, but I wouldn't have put it past him to take what she offered. I think the only thing she really wanted was to be a laird's wife. As soon as she heard Beitris had died, she hounded Fearghas mercilessly to arrange a marriage with your da. Alastair was distraught, he wanted a mother for Niall, and he agreed to it. I have to admit I was glad to be rid of her."

"Ena, that is water under the bridge."

"Nay, it isn't, Fearghas. She's a scheming hag, and if she has her claws in Malcolm again, there is no telling what she's up to." At Fearghas' skeptical expression, Ena added, "Surely ye don't think Fingal is behind this?"

"Nay, my love," said Fearghas, "I know Fingal would never do this. Fingal, ye say the raids began before your father died?"

"Aye, they did."

"But ye were still living here, son. Ye didn't return to Duncurra until after his death. Surely Niall must realize it can't have been ye."

"Actually, Laird, I think that is precisely why he thinks I'm behind it. He knows Tadhg and I were friends, and suspects I cooked up the whole scheme with him." Fingal looked at his hands, unable to look Fearghas in the eye when he said, "It pains me to admit this, but I think that is why he requested I come home and join his guard. I suspect it had more to do with his wanting to keep an eye on me than any skill he thought I had."

Ena looked distraught. "Oh Fingal, ye mustn't believe that. Ye trained harder than any lad ever fostered here. Ye were smart and skilled, but ye were never arrogant. Until ye, I had never seen a lad who could best someone while sparring and still leave his pride intact. I always suspected ye remained humble because ye continually compared yourself to Niall and felt ye came up short. But ye are a fine man and a skilled warrior, never doubt that. Niall may be too hard-headed to see another explanation now, but when ye hold Duncurra for him with Chisholm warriors, he will see his little brother is a man to be reckoned with."

Fingal smiled at her, but Fearghas looked annoyed.

"Ye can remove that indignant look from your face right now, Fearghas Chisholm, ye know full well ye're planning to send him back with an army," she said, daring him with her eyes to challenge her.

When he just smiled and raised his hands in surrender, she said to Fingal, “Try to get some sleep lad, I suspect ye will be leaving at first light.” She rose and left the hall.

Fearghas chuckled after she was out of earshot and said, “Of course ye will return to Duncurra tomorrow at first light with Chisholm soldiers, but I suspect if I hadn’t offered, my little Ena would be leading the troops.”

Chapter 26

Try as she might, Katherine had not been able to convince Laird Matheson to let her ride with his army towards Duncurra.

"Laird Matheson—"

"Tadhg."

"Ye must let me ride with ye."

"I've told ye, it's too dangerous. I'm hoping we can reach Duncurra before Niall leaves it defenseless."

"Ye know that isn't going to happen. If Niall received word yesterday that I was kidnapped, and I am sure he did, it is likely he is already on his way to Cnocreidh."

"We will be riding under a white flag."

"Laird, I don't think that will matter. He will be furious."

"All the more reason for ye to stay safely here."

"But ye don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly. Now go rest, or I will lock ye up again."

Frustrated, Katherine went to her chamber as ordered, but she could not sleep. Just before dawn, she made one last attempt. She found Laird Matheson in the stable with Hamish and several of his other men, saddling their mounts. He arched a brow at her and said, "I am fairly certain I told ye to stay in the keep. Ye are as hard-headed as your husband."

"Aye, I am," she agreed, "that's why I'm here. Ye must take me with you."

"We've been through this. I told ye, we will be riding under a white flag."

"But what if he doesn't see it, or he's so angry he ignores it?"

"I have considered that. I sent scouts ahead to confirm Niall's movements. If they learn that he rides on Cnocreidh as expected, my men and I will take up a position on a stretch of moorland he will need to cross. The open ground will give him plenty of opportunity to see the white flag."

"Surely ye realize, believing what he does, Niall will not wait to hear ye out. Nothing short of seeing me well and unharmed will soothe his ire long enough to get him to listen. Even then he won't believe ye, unless I tell him what happened. He trusts Malcolm. Please listen to me. It would be tragic, if after all this, Malcolm wins because ye are forced to destroy the MacIan army." Katherine didn't completely believe Tadhg would be the victor, but she knew regardless of who won the day, a battle would leave MacIan men dead and weaken the clan.

"Lass, what ye describe could happen even if ye are there, and ye could be injured or killed in the melee."

Then Katherine did something she had avoided ever since her father died. She burst into tears in front of him and all the other men in the stable.

"Och, lass, don't cry." Tadhg resisted the urge to pull her into his arms, but he took her hands in his and said, "Please, don't work yourself up over this. Everything will be all right."

"Nay, it won't," Katherine sobbed. "Why can't ye be reasonable? Ye are likely to kill my husband today, and I can't bear the thought of it."

"Wheesht, calm yourself, lass. It isn't good for ye to get so upset with a bairn on the way."

"Tadhg," she implored, using his Christian name for the first time, "please take me with ye. Let me try to prevent a battle."

Tadhg looked completely at a loss. Evidently, he had no idea how to deal with a weeping woman. Katherine saw him catch Hamish's eye, silently imploring him for help. Hamish grinned and shook his head, "Laird, I hate to disappoint ye, but I think Lady Katherine may be right. The sight of her may be the only thing will hold Laird MacIan's temper in check long enough to listen to reason."

"But look at her. She is exhausted, she won't eat, and she is expecting his child. The sight of her could be enough to incite murder."

"That may be, Laird, but she'll look no better if you don't stop her tears."

Tadhg's shoulders sagged and she knew she had won.

"Wheesht, lass, I'll let ye go with us." Katherine struggled to regain control, and when her tears had quieted, he said, "Ye can go, but ye will do what ye're told. If things get out of hand, I need to know ye'll be safe." She nodded. "Go, get your things, then."

~ * ~

After she left the stable he looked at Hamish and said, "That was a useless warning, wasn't it."

"Aye, Laird, I fear it was."

"God save me if anything happens to her."

When they were ready to leave, he assigned eight men to guard her, knowing that, unlike the MacLennans, his men would guard her with their lives. As the first light of dawn pinked the horizon, the Matheson army rode east with their laird and Katherine MacIan in the lead.

~ * ~

As dawn broke, Fingal MacIan and Fearghas Chisholm led the Chisholm army west towards Duncurra. Fingal hoped to reach Duncurra and secure it before Malcolm arrived. He would prefer to take up a defensive position within Duncurra, rather than battle

MacLennan in the open, but he feared he might not be welcomed or believed.

~ * ~

Niall and the bulk of his army left Duncurra at dawn heading west towards Cnocreidh. His fury was boundless but Father Colm had been right, he was angriest at himself. How could he have let her ride away from Duncurra without his protection? He would rescue her, he would kill Tadhg Matheson, and he would send as many Matheson clansmen to hell today as was humanly possible.

~ * ~

As morning dawned, confident of an easy victory, Malcolm MacLennan positioned his army at the MacIan border. They were prepared to ride as soon as he was sure Niall had departed for Cnocreidh. Malcolm fully believed his army would not do battle today. Convinced he would be welcomed at Duncurra, he believed he would secure it as his own before clan MacIan became fully aware of what had happened. The news that Niall suspected Fingal to be the traitor absolutely thrilled him. Fingal's presence at Duncurra would not be a problem at all. The entire plan unfolded almost more smoothly than he expected. However, he left nothing to chance. He would not allow victory to slip from him because of an unforeseen circumstance.

Chapter 27

Cairbre remained at Duncurra with a handful of men to secure it. Midmorning, he received word from the watch that an army under the MacLennan banner approached from the south. He expected reinforcements from the MacLennan's, but he was a bit surprised at the early hour. Malcolm must have sent them at least part of the way yesterday. It relieved Cairbre to know Duncurra's additional protection would arrive soon.

That relief didn't last long because moments later, the watch informed him an army also approached from the east riding hard under the Chisholm banner. Could he have been so wrong about Fingal? He hadn't seen the laird's brother all morning, and assumed Fingal was in his chamber. Cairbre sent for him, determined to discover what treachery was behind this. When the servant returned, it was Father Colm rather than Fingal who accompanied him.

"Father, ye cannot protect him this time. Niall was right, Fingal has to be responsible for this. With the bulk of our army riding on Cnocreidh, Duncurra is vulnerable and the Chisholm army approaches from the east. I will kill him where he stands before I let him wrest control of clan MacIan and Duncurra from Niall's hands."

"Cairbre, ye are wrong about Fingal."

"Are ye telling me the Chisholm army riding full out towards us is a figment of my imagination? Or perhaps Chisholm just happens to be paying a friendly visit with his full garrison?"

"I'm not telling ye either of those things. In fact, I suspect Fingal is at the head of the Chisholm army, as that is where he was going last night. However, he is not preparing to seize Duncurra, but rather to defend it."

"Are ye daft, old man? Defend it against whom?"

"The MacLennan army, whom I believe also approaches."

Father Colm proceeded to tell Cairbre what he and Fingal had discussed last night. "Cairbre, ye know in your heart Fingal is not a traitor; he is devoted to his brother. Ye have defended him time and time again to Laird MacIan. Laird MacLennan, on the other hand, seizes every opportunity to create discord. Think back to Childermas, man. He and Lady MacIan gained obscene pleasure in upsetting Lady Katherine and scaring young Tomas. Most scoundrels have no difficulty dissembling with their peers, but it's harder to conceal their true nature when they deal with those over whom they have power. The urge to feel that power is too great."

Cairbre knew Father Colm's insight into human nature was accurate, and he wanted to believe Fingal was loyal, but what would the cost be if he was wrong? "Father, if ye are wrong, and I open

Duncurra to Chisholm, Fingal will seize it."

"Cairbre, if ye are wrong and ye open Duncurra to MacLennan, Malcolm will seize it. Who do ye trust more?"

"I trust Fingal, but my laird, to whom I have sworn fealty, does not."

"Then open Duncurra to neither, and the truth will out. If neither of them intends to conquer Duncurra, there will be no battle."

Cairbre saw the wisdom in this and told the few men-at-arms left not to open the gates to anyone. Both armies continued to approach, but the Chisholm army reached Duncurra first. From the wall, Cairbre called to Fingal, "I won't open Duncurra to ye, Fingal."

"I didn't think ye would. I'm not here to lay siege to my home, Cairbre, but I believe that is Laird MacLennan's intent."

"I won't be opening Duncurra to him, either. Father Colm told me of your suspicions. I don't know whom to believe, so I will take no chances."

"Then that will be enough for getting on with. Laird Chisholm and I will not allow Malcolm to approach, but neither will we attack. I only mean to defend Duncurra until Niall returns."

Fearghas directed his men to create a defensive line from the bottom of the crag on which Duncurra stood, extending westward.

~ * ~

So confident he would be able to ride into Duncurra unopposed, Malcolm allowed Eithne to ride at his side. Baffled by the appearance of an army between him and his prize, he took a few appropriate precautions before drawing too close. His messenger assured him Niall had ridden on Cnocreidh at first light, so this could not be his army. It didn't take long for him to recognize Chisholm's banner and he halted his men.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Eithne. "Who dares prevent me from entering my home?"

Malcolm cast a baleful glance at her and said, "There is no audience for your act here, Eithne. Ye have never considered Duncurra your home. Ye have spent more of your time at court or in my bed than ye ever did here. Your designs on it have only ever been driven by spite."

"And yours are driven by greed, my love, but spite and greed make excellent bedfellows."

Malcolm chuckled, "Ye are ruthless, my dear. Niall's only crime against ye was being born first."

"Until he left me destitute in Edinburgh."

"That's a bit of an exaggeration, wouldn't ye say? Twas nearly the other way round. Ye tucked Alastair's money away for years, creating crushing debt instead."

“I had to build my own wealth. Otherwise Alastair could have forced me to return to the Highlands whenever he wished, just to save a few coins. You wouldn’t have had me in your bed then. Not to mention the fact that you needed to weaken them in order to successfully lay siege.”

“Aye, that I did. It almost worked, but who would have thought King David capable of finding Niall a copper? I should have married that rich bit of goods myself.”

“What of me, then?”

“Don’t pout, it doesn’t become ye. Besides, marriage has never been an obstacle to either of us. No matter, it will be resolved soon. His bonny heiress has become a greater weakness than any I could have hoped for.”

“Aye, with Niall chasing after the bitch, we should have been able to ride into Duncurra unhindered. What will you do now?”

“Never fear, my devious little vixen. All may not be lost. Do ye see who is riding with Fearghas?”

“Why, it is my own dear son, Fingal. What makes you think he will be of any help? He has had his head up Niall’s arse from the time he could toddle.”

“Aye, but darling, just as I planned, Niall believes all his recent ills can be laid squarely at Fingal’s feet. My messenger said Niall was ready to kill him last night. Hopefully, he injured Fingal’s pride enough to finally dim his radiance in Fingal’s eyes. Perhaps the lad can be tempted now. I think it is time we had a chat with him.”

A sly smile spread slowly across Eithne’s face. “You could be right, my love. He stands ultimately to gain both Duncurra and Brathanead by joining us. How could he not choose that over being second to a brother who hates him?”

~ * ~

Fingal and Fearghas watched Malcolm’s army halt well to the south, on the western shore of Loch Craos. “It looks like we have spoiled Malcolm’s plans. I suspect the cur is too cowardly to actually fight for something he wants,” observed Fearghas.

When the MacLennan army made no further moves, Fearghas chuckled. “I wonder how long he will sit there until he turns tail and runs.”

Then they saw two riders break away from the stationary army and ride towards them. “Who is riding with Malcolm?” asked Fearghas.

“Damnation,” swore Fingal. “I suspect it is my mother.”

Fingal rode out to meet them in the open area between the two armies.

Eithne said sweetly, “Fingal, dear, what are you doing? Niall

asked Malcolm to come to his aid. Surely you know that. Have Laird Chisholm's army stand down and we can discuss this in Duncurra."

"Duncurra is closed to all of us, Mother." Fingal turned to Malcolm, "Ye are looking well, Malcolm. Ye seem to have recovered quickly from the grave injury ye received at Matheson's hand." Fingal shook his head in disgust. "Niall trusted ye above anyone else. How could ye betray him?"

"I did it for ye and your mother, Fingal."

"For me and my mother? You're not serious." Turning to his mother, he said, "What were ye thinking, Mother? Did ye believe if ye got Niall out of the way, ye could manipulate me more easily than ye did him or Father?"

"Fingal, you wound me. I only want the best for you, and it is time you knew the truth. Alastair was not your father, Malcolm is."

"The hell he is!"

"Darling, it is true. Malcolm and I met before I married Alastair. He and his wife were guests at Currancreag. He felt trapped in a loveless marriage, and I missed my husband so desperately. We didn't intend for it to happen, but in a moment of indiscretion, we turned to each other for comfort."

Fingal snorted. "Comfort? Is that what ye call it? I guess one woman's comfort is another woman's adultery."

Ignoring his comment, Eithne went on, "In just two weeks I suspected I was carrying. Malcolm and I loved each other, but he was already married. I talked Fearghas into arranging a marriage to Alastair. Neither of them knew."

"Stop your lies, Mother."

"These are not lies, Fingal. You need only peer into a looking glass to see how like Malcolm you are. He knew the first time he saw you as a boy. I feared others would notice it as you grew, but no one at Duncurra ever guessed Alastair wasn't your father."

"That is because he was my father," Fingal ground out angrily.

"Alastair may have raised ye, Fingal, but I am your father. That is one reason why I spent so much time at Duncurra. I knew I couldn't claim ye, but I wanted to know my son. When it came time for ye to begin training, I asked Alastair to send ye to me, but Niall had trained under my father and Alastair said he wanted to send ye to Laird Chisholm. Your mother, after all, was a Chisholm. Now Alastair is gone, I can claim ye and name ye as my heir. Not only can all of my holdings be yours, but Duncurra and all of the MacIan's new wealth as well."

Fingal just stared at Malcolm, marshaling his emotions. He knew this was not a ruse. Why had he never noticed the similarities he bore to Malcolm? They seemed plainly evident now. He asked, "Does

anyone else know ye fathered me?"

Fingal noticed how pleased Malcolm looked. *Does he think I'm tempted by this offer*?

"A few of my clansmen know, and many more suspect it. Son, we can do this together. Ye can explain to Fearghas ye made a mistake and send his army back. Ye and I can walk into Duncurra, unchallenged. It will be yours with neither of us having to shed a drop of blood. Matheson has Niall outmanned, but even if Niall isn't killed, when he returns, he will not prevail against my army with the remnant he'll have left. He will have to lay siege to the fortress he so diligently prepared."

Fingal remained very calm as he heard Malcolm's plan. "Ye have been working toward this for a long time, have ye not? Ye were responsible for the raids last spring?" Fingal asked blandly.

"Aye, I had hoped to heat up the old feud between the Mathesons and the MacIans. Unfortunately Tadhg Matheson is not as fractious as his father was. He picked an inconvenient time to become a bloody black friar, so I had to keep raiding. Nothing seemed to draw Niall out, not even the destruction my men wrought after Epiphany."

"So it was ye Tomas heard." Fingal thought carefully about his next move for a moment. "It was rather clever of ye to arrange for Matheson to kidnap Katherine."

"I realized she was Niall's weakness. It is funny, really; he always scoffed at men who professed to love their wives. He said it made them weak, it was one reason he shunned marriage. Well, it might not make them weak, but it certainly does give an enemy a target. I realized nothing short of fear for his little heiress was going to draw Niall into battle, and I needed him to leave Duncurra with the most of his men."

"I can understand how ye managed to pull off the raids. That wouldn't have been too difficult. I don't understand how ye managed to get Matheson's help with the abduction. I didn't know ye were particularly close with him."

"Fingal, my son, Matheson was completely unaware of his role in this." Malcolm chuckled maliciously.

"So he didn't kidnap Katherine? Ye still have her?"

"Nay, for once Matheson took the bait, but his intention was only to use her as leverage to negotiate a treaty. Good men are predictable and they're so easy to manipulate, especially when they think the cause is noble. Of course, I would have faked the kidnapping if it had been necessary. However, once under attack, it might not have taken Matheson long to convince Niall he didn't have her. I really need Matheson to inflict serious damage on Niall's army, and Niall himself, if that is possible."

“I see, so Matheson still has her. Do ye know if she is safe?”

Malcolm grinned slyly. “Fingal, are ye concerned for the lass? She is a pretty thing. Do ye want her, son? We can arrange that. She is carrying Niall’s brat, but your mother knows ways to scathe the baby away.”

The statement sickened Fingal as many things suddenly became clear, but he needed one more piece of information. “Niall thinks I’m behind all this. Ye would not have had an heir if he had killed me yesterday as he wanted to.”

“I did want Niall to believe it was ye, but I knew he would never kill ye. He thinks ye are his brother. As I said, good men are predictable, but I also knew he would not take a traitor into battle with him. I wanted ye to be safe at Duncurra when I arrived.” Malcolm chuckled. “Although I didn’t think ye would have raised an army against me.”

“Ye didn’t?” asked Fingal mildly. “I was the one Niall blamed, but I knew I had done nothing. As you predicted, Niall confined me to the keep, so I had plenty of time to think through all that was happening. Did ye think I wasn’t smart enough to figure this out, or did ye think I wouldn’t have the initiative to do anything about it?”

Malcolm looked slightly puzzled.

“Oh, I see, ye thought I was as faithless as the woman who spawned me, and would willingly betray loved ones.” Fingal finally let the rage he felt show. “Ye were wrong, Laird MacLennan. In this case, the apple has fallen far from the tree—both trees it would seem.”

“Fingal, my son, ye misunderstand—”

“No, Laird, ye misunderstand! Tis my misfortune your seed resulted in my birth, but my father was Alastair MacIan and my brother is Laird Niall MacIan and it is to him I have sworn my fealty. I want no part of ye or your craven scheme.”

He started to turn his mount away, but stopped and warned, “If your army continues to approach Duncurra, ye will be driven back and I will pierce your black heart myself if need be.” Then Fingal turned and galloped back to the Chisholm army, leaving Malcolm and Eithne astonished and staring.

Chapter 28

When Niall's army neared Matheson land, they found the Matheson army had assumed a stationary position on the western edge of a stretch of the moorland that straddled their border. The MacIan army rode hard across the heath, prepared for battle, when Niall saw Katherine, surrounded by Matheson guards at the forefront. He signaled for his men to halt. "What in the hell is he doing?" Niall roared, "Is he trying to get her killed?"

As they reined their horses in, some distance away from the Matheson's position, Diarmad saw the white flag. "Laird, they appear to be surrendering, do ye see the flag?"

"It has to be a trick. This is the bastard who slaughtered animals and burned buildings. He is capable of hiding behind a white flag, or even a woman, it seems."

"I don't think this is a trap, Laird. Matheson's warriors surround Lady Katherine, but Tadhg Matheson is in the open, well away from his men. Ye could kill him before they ever reached ye. Perhaps ye should move closer and see what he wants."

Although terrified for Katherine's safety, he knew Diarmad was right. He also knew Matheson could have Katherine killed before his eyes, and he would be too far away to reach her. There was nothing else to do; he had to ride forward and talk to the bastard. "Diarmad, ye are in command until I return. If I give the signal, show no mercy."

Niall rode forward and stopped his mount about twenty paces from where Tadhg Matheson sat on his horse, well in front of Katherine and her guard. "What is the meaning of this, Matheson? It isn't enough ye take my wife, and slaughtered her MacLennan guard, now ye hide behind her skirts?"

"Slaughtered? MacIan, ye have been woefully misinformed. Laird MacLennan was nowhere in sight, and the six knaves who were supposedly guarding her practically handed her to me without raising a blade. The most impressive resistance came from the lass herself. The worst I did to her guard was leave them trussed on the road, and steal their horses."

"Why are ye lying about this? I received a message from Malcolm yesterday saying most of his men were killed, and he himself was gravely injured."

"Laird, ye have been deceived and I suspect Laird MacLennan is behind it. If your army will stand down, I will let Katherine come forward and she can tell ye herself."

"*Ye* will let her come forward? She is *my wife,* ye bastard," Niall roared.

"And she is as stubborn as ye are, which is why she is here,

against my better judgment. However, unlike the MacLennans, my guard have sworn to protect her with their lives, and until I am sure your hot temper is not going start a war in which she could be injured, she will stay where she is."

Niall could not believe what he was hearing. Matheson was protecting Katherine from him! "Fine," Niall ground out. He signaled for his men to stand down and dismounted. A very small part of him was grateful Tadhg appeared to be protecting her, but only a very small part.

Tadhg also signaled for his men to stand down, dismounted, and motioned for the guard to bring Katherine forward. Katherine flew off Eachann's back and into Niall's arms in a flash.

After the message he had received from Malcolm, Niall had imagined the worst. "Katherine, are ye all right? I swear I will kill him now if he hurt ye."

"I'm fine, Niall. Laird Matheson has treated me as a guest. But there is no time to waste. Ye must listen, love, what he said was true. Malcolm abandoned me, and my guard simply surrendered. It was as if they expected an ambush, and I suspect they did." As quickly as she could, Katherine explained what she and Tadhg had pieced together.

After hearing it all, Niall said, "Katherine, ye are accusing Malcolm of the unthinkable. He is a trusted friend and ally. Ye would have me believe these heinous accusations because Matheson, the man who kidnapped ye, said he didn't lead the raids on my land? He could have as easily made up the story of how he knew ye would be traveling to Brathanead."

In a gentler voice, he added, "Ye look for the best in people, sweetling, and are too willing to trust. That was my father's downfall —he trusted Eithne and she nearly ruined us. Why can't ye see Fingal is behind this? He is in league with this devil." Niall glared at Tadhg. "Matheson will see us both dead and Fingal as Laird MacIan."

"If that were the case, Niall, why would he have met ye here, in the open? He could have stayed behind the walls at Cnocreidh and let ye lay siege until he decimated your forces. I know as well as ye do ye would never have given up as long as ye thought ye had a chance to rescue me. As to killing me, he certainly didn't have to bring me here to see that done. Ye are as guilty of blind trust as ye say I am. Ye may believe all of the rest of this is conjecture, but here is a fact no one can deny. I witnessed it. The man ye trusted to guard me, the man ye believed to be your most faithful ally, abandoned me and apparently lied to ye about it."

"Why would he do that, Katherine?" Niall asked, sounding irritated. "What could he hope to gain?"

"Duncurra," she answered, exasperated. "I suspect he thought to

fatally weaken ye with the raids last spring. Malcolm and Eithne are an unholy pair, and I wouldn't be surprised if the financial ruin she nearly achieved was part of the plan. If that had gone on unchecked, Malcolm could have taken Duncurra by now with an army of squires. Instead, he had to ensure ye would retaliate against Matheson with a sufficient enough force to leave Duncurra vulnerable. The raids have become increasingly more brutal, Malcolm was goading ye to do this."

"But Malcolm didn't kidnap ye."

"Nay, he just laid the groundwork for someone else to. Malcolm intended to draw ye and your army out of Duncurra. Niall, don't ye see, Duncurra can be held for quite a while with a small number of men, but not if the approaching army is expected to be there as reinforcement."

The realization hit Niall like a rock fall. Tadhg, who had been standing to one side, cautiously watching the exchange, said, "Niall, I swear to ye, by all the angels and saints, I led one raid on your holding last fall in retaliation for your many raids on mine, and I abducted your wife to force ye into negotiating a truce. I fear the man who is responsible for this may already be in control of Duncurra but, if ye are willing, I will lend ye the support of my army to reclaim it."

Niall considered the offer for a moment. This, too, could be a trick to ensure the Mathesons surrounded and destroyed his army. However, Katherine was right, Tadhg could have achieved that, with much less damage to his own army, if he had simply stayed at Cnocreidh. Finally, Niall extended his arm and said, "I would be grateful for your support." He added, "But make no mistake, Matheson, I haven't forgiven ye for abducting my wife."

Tadhg gripped his forearm, grinned, and said, "I didn't expect ye had. However, speaking of your wife, perhaps it would be best to send her back to Cnocreidh now until Duncurra is secured."

Niall agreed, but Katherine refused. "I will *not* go back to Cnocreidh. My place is with ye."

"Katherine, we are going into battle, it would be folly for ye to be there. Ye could be killed," he said as he pulled her into an embrace.

"Nay, Niall. Nay," she said, and beat her fists against his chest. "I didn't want ye to send me away to Brathanead, and look what happened. I will be safe with ye."

"Katherine, I was wrong to send ye away and I am sorry, but I will not allow ye to return to Duncurra until I am sure it is safe."

"Ye'll send an excessively large number of men to guard me, anyway. I can stay well to the rear of any battle, miles back if ye choose, but please don't send me away."

Niall considered her plea for a moment. Truthfully, he didn't want her out of his sight ever again, but this was just too dangerous. He had

no idea what they would find when they reached Duncurra. “Nay, Katherine, I will come for ye as soon as it is safe. Ye will go back to Cnocreidh now.” Although his voice was gentle, it brooked no further argument.

Angry and frustrated, Katherine once again had no choice. She mounted Eachann and headed back to the Matheson stronghold, accompanied by Tadhg’s commander, Hamish, seven other Matheson warriors, and four of Niall’s elite guard, Muir, Turcuil, Rab-the-red, and Keavy.

“Does she ever just do what she is told?” asked Tadhg.

“Gave ye trouble, did she?” responded Niall with a chuckle. “Good for her.”

With Katherine headed to safety, Niall and Tadhg turned their armies toward Duncurra.

Chapter 29

"He's a romantic fool," said Malcolm sadly as he watched his son ride back to the Chisholm army.

"He's a lapdog," said Eithne with disdain. "Every time he's kicked, he slinks back to Niall."

Malcolm leveled an angry stare at her. "And yet ye have gotten in your fair share of kicks, but he doesn't show ye that same devotion. Perhaps he sees nothing in ye worth slinking back to."

Eithne sneered at him. "Well, that is at least one similarity he doesn't share with his father."

"Ye need to guard your tongue, woman. If things don't go well for us today, I suspect ye will be banished from Duncurra, and would therefore be well advised not to bite the only hand left to feed ye."

"If things don't go well? Have we not already failed?"

"Not entirely, my dear. Victory will be a bit more difficult, but it is still within our grasp." With that Malcolm turned his horse and headed back to his men.

Eithne followed him. "You are going to do battle with Chisholm?"

"Well, I have no intention of leading the charge, but aye, I have an army here, and I intend to take Duncurra very soon."

"Then what are you waiting for? Order the attack and let's get this over with."

"Eithne, my love, I believe in having contingencies. I had hoped it wouldn't be necessary to use them, but as soon as I realized the Chisholm army approached, I sent a large number of my men into the forest on the east side of Loch Craos. It was partially to prevent Chisholm from knowing just how large a force I brought. But also, if a battle became necessary, my men there could approach from the other side, effectively surrounding Chisholm. I can destroy him. I just need to give my men enough time to get into place."

"And what if Niall returns before they do?"

"That will not happen. Ye continue to underestimate me. I also sent Duncan with a contingent of men into position near Cnocreidh yesterday. Once Niall has had the chance to get there and lay siege, my men will move in and take up positions well behind him. If Niall appears to be making any gains, they will attack. If he retreats, they will do away with whatever is left of his army. Either way, my dear, before the end of the day, Niall will no longer be an obstacle."

"And what if Niall happens upon them himself before reaching Cnocreidh?"

"Naturally, he will think I sent them there to support him," Malcolm said with a malevolent sneer.

~ * ~

When Fingal returned, Fearghas asked, “What’s wrong? Ye look defeated. What did they tell you, lad?”

“It is as we suspected. Malcolm intends to take Duncurra. He planned to stroll in as an ally and simply seize control.”

“He admitted this to ye?” asked Fearghas, looking astonished.

“Aye. He told me the entire plan. Lady Chisholm was right; he and Eithne have been plotting this for some time. They mistakenly believed I would join them.”

“Because Eithne is your mother? Are they daft? Do they not recognize your devotion to your brother?”

“It seems that Niall is not my brother.”

Fearghas looked at Fingal askance.

“Apparently, Malcolm is my father. Eithne was already carrying when she married Laird MacIan. They did all of this for me,” Fingal said bitterly. “Niall was right, it is my fault.”

“Don’t be an idiot! If anyone is to blame, it is I. I should have known that conniving bitch was up to something when she pushed me to arrange the marriage. But I’m not sorry I did. Ye are the man ye are now solely because Alastair MacIan raised ye. Make no mistake, lad, ye are his son, regardless of what man that tart spread her legs for first.”

“But the destruction they have wrought was for me,” said Fingal in anguish.

“If ye believe that, ye are the daft one. Ye had nothing to do with this. This is about what they want. If this was truly all for ye, Malcolm should be turning his army home now ye have refused to be a part of it. Greed is the only thing that drives him, not paternal devotion. Given the chance, he would run ye through today regardless of whose son ye are, if it was the only way to achieve his goal. I’m not sure why he waits to attack, but I have no doubt he will, and probably very soon.”

~ * ~

Malcolm didn’t wait much longer. Just before midday, he ordered the attack to begin. From the rear he watched the battle with some dismay. The Chisholm warriors were fierce and highly skilled. Although Malcolm had superior numbers, he was losing men quickly. Then he saw something which caused him to doubt his ability to win the day. The men he sent around the loch had arrived as planned. However, Niall’s army, reinforced by Matheson, approached from the west. Now, not only were his opponents more skilled, his army was also seriously outnumbered.

Malcolm did not know what could have happened. Niall should have just been reaching Cnocreidh and yet here he was with Tadhg Matheson at his side. Now it seemed not only would he not be

victorious, he stood to lose the entire force currently in battle. If he ordered a retreat now, Niall would pursue him. He risked not being able to make good his own escape.

~ * ~

Niall wasn't sure what he expected to find when he reached Duncurra, but perhaps the last thing he imagined was Laird Chisholm's army defending it.

"It looks like your baby brother has your back after all," Tadhg said, his face splitting into a grin.

"If ye would stop patting yourself on the shoulder for a moment, ye would realized they are about to be surrounded," Niall growled, pointing to the MacLennan men approaching from the east.

Once the Matheson and MacIan armies joined the fray, however, the battle ended quickly. A small number of MacLennans turned tail as soon as they realized their laird had retreated, but many others died or fell wounded. When the battle was over, Niall ordered Duncurra opened so the injured could receive treatment. Then he found Fingal and Fearghas Chisholm. Gripping Fearghas' forearm, he said, "Laird Chisholm, thank ye for defending Duncurra. I will never be able to repay ye."

"I trust ye will do the same for me if I ever need ye," Fearghas replied.

Then Niall turned to face Fingal. He had spent much of the ride back wondering what he would say to his brother. He felt he had no right even to ask for Fingal's forgiveness. Finding Fingal defending Duncurra in spite of everything was humbling.

"Fingal, I am sorry. Ye have never once given me a reason not to trust ye, and rather than rely on that fact, I have listened to barbs and innuendos from people whom I had good reasons not to trust. I fear in my blindness, I have lost something of great value—the love and respect of my brother. Please forgive me."

Fingal smiled, but there seemed to be a deep sadness behind the smile. He said, "There is nothing to forgive. Malcolm and Eithne have been practicing deceit for so long, they have become masters. I have only just learned the true depths of their treachery today. As fate would have it, I am not truly your brother after all."

"Fingal, of course ye are my brother. What are ye talking about?"

With a sad shake of his head, Fingal explained. "Apparently, Eithne was pregnant by Malcolm when she married your father. I am ashamed to say everything that has happened was their attempt to wrest control of Duncurra and Clan MacIan from ye. Malcolm's primary goal was to expand his own power, and ultimately to pass it all on to me as his heir. To make matters even worse, my father revealed the true depths of his cowardice by fleeing and leaving his

men to die as he escaped."

"He is not among the dead?" asked Niall.

"He never entered the battle," replied Fingal in disgusted. "He held a position at the rear of his men, surrounded by a handful of guards. Shortly after ye and Matheson arrived, he escaped without ordering a retreat. I intended to follow him, but by the time I fought through, he was long gone."

Laird Chisholm said, "I think we should run the cur to ground and finish this today."

Niall answered, "There is nothing I would like more. It is not wise to let him reach Brathanead. Select the men ye wish to take and we will leave immediately."

As Fingal prepared to join them, Niall pulled him aside and said, "Fingal, I think ye should stay here." At the pained look on Fingal's face, Niall added, "It isn't what ye think. I will never again question your loyalty, and I know ye want vengeance. However, I don't think ye should be put into the position of possibly having to kill the man who sired ye."

"Niall, he deserves to die, even if only for abandoning his own men today."

"I agree, but still, no man should have to carry that on his conscience, justified or not. Let me do this. Stay and see to things here for me."

Fingal reluctantly agreed. Within minutes, Lairds MacIan, Chisholm, and Matheson, with warriors from all three clans, headed south toward the MacLennan border.

~ * ~

Katherine and her escort were only a few miles away from Cnocreidh when Hamish reined in on the edge of a clearing and motioned to Muir. After a quick discussion with Hamish, Muir came to her and said quietly, "My lady, I don't wish to worry ye; however, there appear to be a large number of men on horseback in the woods beyond the clearing. We can hear them, and Hamish doesn't know who they might be or why they are here. Until we know differently, we can only assume they are a threat, perhaps sent by Laird MacLennan, but we don't think they have seen us yet."

"We are going to backtrack with ye and avoid them by circling to the north. Stay as quiet as ye possibly can and, if we are attacked, ye must not leave my side unless I tell ye differently. Do ye understand?"

Katherine nodded.

They quietly retreated a safe distance, and skirted around the threat, reaching the edge of the forest on the northeast side of Cnocreidh.

Before they entered into the open land surrounding the castle,

Muir said, “We think we have avoided them, but if we are attacked as we move into the open, ye ride with Hamish as hard as ye can toward the keep. He will see it opened to ye, and the rest of us will protect your back.

They had barely entered the open area when a group of at least two score and ten men swarmed out of the forest to the east of Cnocreidh. As Muir instructed, Katherine rode hard toward the keep with Hamish at her side. They had barely covered a quarter of the distance when Hamish’s horse took an arrow to his chest and crumpled under him. Katherine stopped to reach a hand to Hamish, but he slapped Eachann’s rump, forcing the horse back into a run toward the castle. However, that momentary pause was enough time for Duncan, who had separated himself from the battle, to reach her. He pulled her onto his horse and rode full speed toward the forest. Before he reached the forest with her, Katherine was able to twist in his arms enough to see her escorts were holding their own, joined by warriors pouring out of Cnocreidh. Duncan crushed her against his chest and pushed her forward, leaning low over the horse’s neck to avoid the branches. He held her so tightly she could barely breathe. She wanted to fight, but knew if she fell from the horse at the breakneck speed they were riding, she could be seriously injured and possibly lose the baby. So she held on, praying someone would catch them.

As they rode, Duncan shouted orders to the others, telling them to cover his back and follow as soon as they were able.

“Duncan, there is no way ye can win this today. We know Malcolm was behind everything. Niall and Laird Matheson have joined forces and returned to Duncurra. Stop now, take me back, and Niall will reward ye.”

“Ye are daft if ye think I believe that, my lady. Malcolm is my cousin and has been planning this for years. He is not only cunning and cautious, but he was also prepared to do whatever was necessary to achieve his goal.”

“Ye are the daft one if ye believe he will prevail against their combined armies.”

“I will admit that together Matheson and MacIan will present a challenge, but it is likely Malcolm controlled Duncurra well before they arrived. The fact is, my lady, if Malcolm holds Duncurra under siege, having Laird MacIan’s wife as hostage could only be advantageous. Nevertheless, if ye are right and Malcolm fails, I still stand to gain control of Clan MacLennan. Having ye as a hostage won’t hurt me, either. This is far from being over for me, and ye are too valuable a tool to just let ye go.”

The ride was bone jarring and Katherine suspected Duncan pushed

his mount as hard as he dared. She heard horsemen following them, but she didn't know if they were the other MacLennan warriors, her own guard, or more Mathesons from the castle. Late in the afternoon, Katherine finally recognized her surroundings. They were just north of the mountain pass where Tadhg had kidnapped her only two days earlier, and she knew this was MacLennan land. However, rather than turning south, in the direction of Brathanead, Duncan turned north.

"Why are ye not riding toward Brathanead?"

"So ye know where ye are, do ye?"

"Aye, but why are ye riding north?"

"Because, my lady, it is unexpected. If the men following us are MacIans or Mathesons they will ride toward Brathanead. By heading north we will elude them. Besides, Laird MacLennan is likely to be at or near Duncurra, and we may have a better chance of reaching him there."

Duncan's ruse appeared to have worked, for as they travelled northward, there did not seem to be anyone in close pursuit. However, they had not been on their new course long before they heard horses approaching ahead of them. Duncan swore and turned his horse into the woods. Before Katherine realized what was happening, he clamped a hand viciously across her mouth. "Ye are more valuable to me alive than dead, Lady Katherine. Still, I will slit your throat if ye make a sound."

~ * ~

Malcolm was surprised to see Duncan leave the forest with Katherine.

"Well, what have we here, Duncan?"

"We waited, as ye said, for Niall's army to arrive, but they never did. Finally we saw Lady Katherine arrive under heavy guard. I knew something must have gone wrong, and I suspected ye might need her as a hostage."

Malcolm listened but his eyes didn't leave Katherine. She appeared calm and composed and she didn't look at him. The mask she assumed didn't fool him. She was afraid, and fear was an excellent motivator for cooperation. Pain was as well, and he would use it if he needed to.

"Indeed I do," Malcolm sneered. He moved his mount until he was within reach, grabbed her chin, and turned her head to face him. He laughed malevolently. "With Niall's bonny little wife in residence at Brathanead, we will have a delightful morsel with which to bargain. Well done, cousin."

She knocked his hand away and spat on him. He backhanded her. "Ye will pay for that, wench, and I can assure ye that ye will remember your uncle as gentle before I am through with ye."

To Duncan he said, “Bind and gag her, we need to keep moving.”

Duncan did as Malcolm instructed, but said, “Laird MacLennan—I did not expect to find ye returning to Brathanead. Riders followed us from Cnocreidh, but I don’t know how many. Some may have been my own men, but I suspect they were not alone. I turned north hoping to elude them all, but if we proceed southwards, we will put ourselves within their reach.”

Malcolm looked irritated. “We can’t stop here. I have no doubt vengeance is on our heels as well. We will ride up the mountain and hide in the caves until it is safe to proceed to Brathanead. Make sure that gag is secure, I don’t want a sound out of her.” Malcolm decided to take another precaution as well. “Eithne, dismount and give me your mantle.” He switched Katherine’s mantle for Eithne’s and hoisted Katherine onto Eithne’s palfrey.

“What are ye doing?” demanded Eithne. “Why are ye giving her my mount?”

“Ye’ll ride with Duncan.” Eithne protested, but Malcolm pacified her by explaining, “From a distance, anyone will assume ye are Katherine, and they will not risk harming ye.” Besides, he might need a diversion, and as long as he secured his own safety, the consequences mattered little to him.

~ * ~

With her hands bound in front of her, Katherine knew once they began to move again, she would be unable to do anything but stay in the saddle. The wind sharpened and the clouds thickened in the late afternoon sky. It looked as if a snowstorm were brewing and, if it broke soon, the fresh snow would obliterate any trace of their trail. With her bound hands concealed by the mantle around her shoulders, Katherine unpinned the jeweled brooch that had been Niall’s present to her on Epiphany. She hid it between her palms, and just before they left the trail to head up the mountain, she let it slip out of her hands to land in the track. She prayed no one noticed it, and, in their rush to escape, no one did.

Chapter 30

As the day wore on, Niall's frustration rose. Malcolm seemed to remain just out of reach. Late in the afternoon, dread filled him when they met Muir and Turcuil with a contingent of Matheson soldiers riding north.

Muir filled him in as quickly as possible. "As soon as the MacLennans poured from the woods, I knew we were badly outnumbered, but we thought we could hold them back long enough for Hamish to get Katherine inside the walls. Matheson reinforcements joined us immediately and we routed them."

"And Katherine is safe?"

"Nay, Laird. Hamish was unhorsed and she slowed to help him. He slapped Eachann back into a run, but it was too late. Duncan reached her and escaped."

"Dear God."

"Laird, I'm sorry. Rab was gravely injured as well. We left him at Cnocreidh, but Hamish, Keavy, Turcuil, and I pursued them with Matheson warriors. We reached the mountain pass leading to Brathanead less than an hour ago. Not knowing for sure which direction he would go, we split up. Hamish and Keavy led some of the Matheson warriors south, while Turcuil and I led the rest north."

"And ye met no one?"

"Nay, Laird."

Niall swore. How could he have underestimated the true depths of Malcolm's deception? He hadn't simply relied on drawing Niall away from Duncurra, he had men in place to assure his defeat at Cnocreidh as well. With every ounce of control he had, he tamped down his rage and focused on finding Katherine.

The leaders agreed it was unlikely Malcolm's party had been far enough ahead to have made it through the pass before the warriors riding from Cnocreidh had reached it. Muir and his men should have met Malcolm and his guard on the track. Since they didn't, it was likely that Duncan had indeed ridden north and met Malcolm's party. Once alerted, Malcolm had probably left the trail to hide in either the woods or the mountains.

They searched along the track for signs of Malcolm's trail, but because his army had ridden north the previous day, horses had trampled the snow on the track, making it impossible to distinguish a new trail from an older one. To make matters worse, the clouds thickened and before long, a light snow began to fall. If they didn't find some indication of where Malcolm had left the track soon, fresh snow would cover any evidence. They had nearly given up hope when one of the Chisholm warriors saw the jewels from Katherine's brooch

glinting in the snow.

It appeared that Malcolm's party had headed for caves in the mountains, and once again Niall was in pursuit. It wasn't long before the fresh snow changed from a curse to a blessing. They found Malcolm's tracks.

~ * ~

Katherine tried to work her hands free, but only succeeded in causing the rope to chafe her wrists until they were raw, bloody, and burning. The gag Duncan had stuffed in her mouth tickled the back of her throat, requiring her to constantly fight the need to retch. On top of everything else, she was freezing.

While riding with Duncan, she had at least been warm. Now she had very little to protect her from the cold. Having removed the brooch holding it around her shoulders, Katherine's plaid slid down her back underneath the mantle and bunched around her waist. Furthermore, knowing why Malcolm had forced her to trade places with Eithne, she had shaken the mantle's hood off, exposing her kertch. Even from a distance, in the gathering darkness, Niall would know she was not Eithne. While she thought the plan was clever and no one seemed to notice or care that her hood had slipped off, her linen kertch provided no protection from the cold and snow.

~ * ~

Malcolm held up his hand, halting his men for a moment. In spite of the wind that whipped and moaned around him, he heard the unmistakable sound of horses approaching. If he could buy himself just a little time, he could disappear into the caves with Katherine.

"Duncan, stay here with Eithne and the rest of the guard. They will think it is Katherine with ye, and that will give me time to escape to the caves. When they approach, surrender."

"Aye, Laird," answered Duncan.

"Surrender? They'll kill us all when they realize ye still have the little bitch," screeched Eithne.

"Nay, they won't. Niall is nothing if not noble. He will accept your surrender and not harm ye. I will pay the ransom to get ye and my men released.

~ * ~

Niall and the men with him saw the small party stopped ahead of them and charged. As they drew closer, Niall noticed the pair riding away. Even in the heat of battle, Niall's brain registered the white covering on the woman's head and knew that Malcolm still had Katherine. He pulled back and skirted around the battle, riding hard to reach Katherine. As he did, he heard Eithne's blood curdling scream and Tadhg's anguished battle cry. Ignoring it, he continued to chase Malcolm and Katherine.

Niall saw Malcolm look over his shoulder, panicked. In horror, Niall watched as Malcolm drew his sword and raised it toward Katherine, but it wasn't Katherine for whom Malcolm aimed. He slashed at the flank of Katherine's mount. The mare screamed and reared. Unbridled fear gripped Niall's heart as he helplessly watched Katherine struggle to stay on her mount with bound wrists.

He tried to reach her as she clutched desperately at the edge of the saddle. The ground had become slippery with snow and the horse was sliding and stumbling. All thoughts of vengeance for Malcolm fled as Niall saw Katherine lose her struggle to stay in the saddle. She was thrown to the ground, but with her bound hands, she couldn't break her fall.

When he finally reached her side, he removed her gag. Relief flooded him when he found her unconscious but still alive. He cut her bonds and felt her limbs for signs of breaks. It looked as if her only injuries were the lump on her head, a bruise on her face, and abrasions on her wrists caused by her bonds. Vengeance would have to wait; he couldn't leave his wife.

Tadhg arrived at Niall's side just as Niall gathered Katherine's small limp body into his arms.

Enraged, Niall said, "The bastard caused the horse to throw her to save his own worthless skin."

"I'll take a few men and go after him. Get her to safety."

By this time, Laird Chisholm had joined them and said to Tadhg, "I'll go with ye."

"Nay, Fearghas," Tadhg said. "Malcolm has laid so many traps in the bid to win Duncurra, there is no telling what might await on the way back there. Niall needs as many men as possible riding escort."

"Aye, Fearghas. I have to get her home," Niall said as he wrapped his plaid around his unconscious wife and rose from the ground with her. "I cannot lose her," he said, his voice raw with emotion.

Chapter 31

Vaguely aware she finally felt warm, Katherine had trouble remembering why she had been so cold in the first place. As she struggled to emerge from oblivion, she also realized she had a terrible headache. She fought to open her eyes, but the light only intensified her pain, causing her to moan and retch. Gentle hands rolled her to her side, yet her retching brought nothing up.

She heard her husband's anxious voice say, "Effie, she is waking."

She tried again to open her eyes. For a moment, the light sent another wave of searing pain through her head, but she kept them open this time, and saw her husband's worried face. He was kneeling by her bed. Effie moved into view behind him. "Ye've come back to us, have ye? Do ye know where ye are?"

Katherine blinked and tried to look around. The movement caused her head to swim and she wanted to retch again, but she said, "Home."

"Aye, lass, ye're home," Niall said, his voice husky.

Katherine closed her eyes for a moment. *Why was the midwife here*? She opened her eyes again and managed to ask, "The baby?"

"Is fine," answered Effie. "But ye have a nasty bump on your head from the fall."

"I fell?" asked Katherine. She closed her eyes again, trying to remember. Images began to flood her mind as her memory returned. She moaned again. "Malcolm slashed my mount's side and the poor thing threw me."

"That's right, sweetling, but ye will be fine now," said Niall, with a hint of desperation in his voice.

Effie brought her a bowl with some broth in it. "Try to drink some of this, my lady."

Katherine swallowed a few sips before, overcome with exhaustion, she slipped back into oblivion.

~ * ~

When she awoke later, the room was dark save for the light from the fire. Niall held her in his arms, but he was not asleep. "Back again?" he asked, his voice still thick with concern.

"Aye," Katherine answered. Her head hurt less than it had earlier and she felt hungry. "Is there any more broth?"

Visibly relieved, Niall answered, "Aye, sweetling, there is." He helped her drink a little more, and she ate a few bites of bread as well before giving in once again to the powerful urge to sleep.

~ * ~

The next time she woke, sunlight streamed in through the window, and she felt considerably better. Niall slept beside her, but

woke instantly as she stirred. “Good morning, love,” he said, and kissed her gently.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Ye were thrown from a horse.”

“I remember that. What happened here? What happened with Malcolm and Eithne? And how did I get back here?”

“Whoa, sweetling, there is plenty of time to tell ye everything. For now, I will tell ye Fingal arrived at the same conclusions ye and Matheson did. He brought Laird Chisholm here to defend Duncurra, and was holding Malcolm off when we arrived. Malcolm fled, as ye are aware, because he managed to get his clutches on ye. After ye were thrown from the horse, I brought ye back here. Ye slept for almost a full day, waking for the first time yesterday afternoon.”

“But what about —”

“That is enough for now,” he said firmly.

For the next couple of days, Niall refused to let Katherine leave their chamber and made certain she did little more than rest and eat. He gave her very sketchy details of events prior to her capture and none of what had happened since. Finally, on the third evening, she insisted on dining in the great hall. She wanted to hear the full story before she did, and, grudgingly, Niall agreed. He told her what Fingal had learned from Eithne and Malcolm.

“Sweet Mary,” she said, “What a shock for Fingal.”

“Aye. Apparently many MacLennans either knew or suspected Malcolm was his father. It is easy to see the similarities now we know, but no one here ever suspected.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, because he is so much like ye.”

“Katherine, my sweet, other than our height, Fingal looks nothing like me. Everyone always assumed his looks came from Eithne.”

“I didn’t say he looked like ye, I said he *is* like ye. He is a strong, competent warrior, but he is also gentle and tolerant. He is fair and kind, and protects those who need him. He is proud, unfailingly loyal, and he would sacrifice his life for this clan. He is so much like ye that no one who truly knows ye both would ever deny he is your brother.”

Her pronouncement took Niall aback. Everything she said about Fingal was true. He found it endearing that she also applied those traits to him. However, the fact that she believed others drew the same comparisons was, quite frankly, humbling. Furthermore, she had referred to Fingal as his brother in the present tense. He certainly still considered Fingal his brother, and was glad she did as well.

“How is he handling all of this?” Katherine asked after a moment.

“He is upset, as ye can imagine, but worse, he feels guilty.”

“Over what?” Katherine demanded.

“Over the fact that Malcolm and Eithne told him they did all of

this for him."

"What a load of nonsense. Malcolm and Eithne are the two most self-serving people I have ever met, even surpassing my Uncle Ambrose. Having Fingal as a son was a convenient excuse, but that is all."

"I'm sure ye are right, but Fingal is determined to return to Chisholm. It is one of the reasons I have kept ye secreted away up here. He will not leave until he has apologized to ye, and I keep telling him ye are too weak to have visitors." Niall added sheepishly, "I had hoped after a few days he would change his mind about leaving."

"What's the matter with ye? He has sworn fealty to ye, hasn't he?"

"Aye, he has, but—"

"But nothing, ye must simply refuse to release him. Ye have no problem commanding other people and expecting your commands to be followed without question."

By "other people," Niall assumed she referred not so subtly to herself, and he laughed for what felt like the first time in weeks. "As ye wish, my lady," he said, bowing to her. "Ye still haven't forgiven me for sending ye away—twice?"

"Well, I forgive ye for the first time. Had ye not done that, we never would have learned Tadhg wasn't behind the raids."

"True," Niall agreed.

"So have ye forgiven him for abducting me?"

He realized she had cornered him and glared at her. "I suppose I have," he acknowledged grudgingly.

"Good. Then, I will consider forgiving both of ye for sending me back to Cnocreidh."

"My lady, ye will do more than consider forgiving us. I command it," he said, capturing her in his arms and kissing all thoughts from her head.

Soon the memories of last few days fled and all that remained was their deep love and need for each other. Niall lowered her to the bed, intending to make sweet, unhurried love to her, but his good intentions fled as her passion fanned his desire for her. After they had reached a soul shattering release together, they lay in each other's arms, feeling sated and basking in the afterglow.

Before either of them was ready to leave this haven, a knock sounded at the door. Diarmad called, "Laird, I am sorry to bother ye, but I have just received word from the watch that Laird Matheson approaches."

Niall called, "I will be down shortly." Reluctantly he rose from bed and dressed. Katherine did as well.

"Ye didn't finish telling me all that happened," she said. "Where

has Tadhg been?"

Niall sighed. "Ye remember Malcolm put ye on Eithne's palfrey wearing her mantle?"

"Aye, he was trying to buy time for his escape. He believed ye would not harm Eithne when ye discovered it was her."

"Aye, I wouldn't have, but evidently Eithne didn't believe that. As Malcolm's men surrendered, she stabbed Duncan in the gut and tried to push him off his horse. I think she intended to run, but as Duncan fell, she was pulled off the horse with him. In the confusion, they were both trampled."

"Poor Duncan, what a terrible way to die."

"Katherine, he was Malcolm's commander and clearly a big part of this whole plan."

"I know," she said sadly. "It is hard to feel much pity for Eithne—her death was the direct result of her own cowardice—but he had a wife and daughters who will have to go on without him."

"Tadhg suffered a moment of panic trying to save her, thinking it was ye. I knew ye were with Malcolm as soon as I saw him riding away; I saw your kertch."

"Well then, I guess it was worth freezing over," Katherine said, and confessed she had shaken her hood off on purpose. "So Eithne caused her own death, but what happened to Malcolm?"

"Malcolm's little trick worked. By causing your mount to throw ye, he bought enough time to elude us. Tadhg and his men followed him that night, but I am not sure what happened after that. Perhaps we'll learn more when he arrives."

"Then I suppose we should join our guests," said Katherine as she pulled a plaid around her shoulders.

"Ye might need this," Niall said, producing the brooch she had dropped in the snow.

"Ye did find it," she said, giving him the brilliant smile that made his knees weak.

"Aye," he said, pinning her plaid together at her neck. "I am going to have to keep ye firmly rooted by my side to make sure ye don't lose it again." He kissed her, and reluctantly breaking the kiss, he said, "Ye really need to stop distracting me."

~ * ~

When they reached the great hall, Tomas barreled toward her, throwing his arms around her waist yelling, "Mama, ye are all right!"

Everyone there greeted Katherine with nearly as much enthusiasm. It filled Niall with pride to see the firm place Katherine held in the hearts of his clan. Looking up at the front doors, he saw Tadhg and his men enter the hall just as Fingal approached Katherine and bowed. "My lady, please accept my apologies for everything that

has happened."

Katherine looked him squarely in the eyes. "I will not."

Fingal appeared stunned and the room fell silent.

"Fingal, there is nothing to forgive. Ye are Niall's brother, and nothing that has happened is your fault. Well, nothing other than ye saving Duncurra by bringing Laird Chisholm here."

Fingal glanced at Niall, "Didn't ye tell her?"

"Aye, I told her."

"Then, my lady, ye know I am not Niall's brother."

"Fingal, I would have thought by now ye would know blood ties mean very little to me. Given enough time, my father's brother would probably have beaten me to death."

"That's different."

"Is it? Do ye think I could possibly love Tomas any more if I had given birth to him?"

Fingal didn't answer.

"Regardless of who your parents were, ye have been a better brother to Niall and to me than anyone could hope for. Ye are Fingal MacIan because Alastair MacIan was your father in the truest sense of the word." Then taking his hands in hers, she said earnestly, "Ye will always be my brother, and ye have my eternal gratitude for saving my home."

With that she kissed him on the cheek. Then breaking the silence in the room, clearly trying to imitate Niall's commanding voice, she said, "This discussion is over. I will hear no more of this nonsense."

Niall laughed until tears ran down his face to see his little wife render his brother speechless. "No more arguments, brother, I couldn't allow ye to return to Laird Chisholm now if I wanted to, and I don't."

Fingal grinned.

Tadhg also appeared to have trouble containing his amusement. He crossed the room to greet Niall and said with a smirk, "Ye deserve her, Niall. I, for one, intend on having a quiet life married to a sweet, biddable lass."

"Don't tempt fate, my friend," responded Niall, gripping his forearm. "I swore never to marry at all, but I will be eternally grateful to our king for this match. Join us for our evening meal. I will hear of your travels later." As much as Niall wanted to know what had happened with Malcolm, he did not want to risk upsetting Katherine before the meal.

Tadhg took the hint.

There was a festive feel to dinner that evening and Niall did not want to spoil it. However, after the meal was finished and they moved to sit by the hearth, he could delay no longer and finally asked, "What did ye find when ye searched for Malcolm?"

“Initially we found nothing. It was snowing heavily by then and we thought it must have covered his tracks completely. We took shelter in the caves until the storm blew out, assuming he’d done the same thing. Then we searched for several days but found no sign of him. We finally found him after we turned back. It looked as if his horse lost its footing and stumbled where the track skirted the edge of a deep gulley, not far beyond the place where we thought we lost his trail in the heavy snow. Both he and the horse were dead at the bottom of the gulley.”

All was quiet for a moment, and finally Father Colm said, “Malcolm was responsible for his own destruction. I hope the poor horse didn’t suffer.”

Epilogue

It had been an unusually hot summer, or so Katherine thought. Perhaps she only felt it more keenly because she was heavy with child, but this August morning felt particularly stifling. Hot and edgy, she hadn't slept well that night, waking up often with her back aching. She must have worked too hard the previous day, she reasoned. After the fitful night, she woke earlier than usual, tired and with her back still sore. She tried to do the things she normally did, but had trouble focusing on even the simplest task. Finally, she gave up and walked out of the keep and across the courtyard. She reached the wall circling the steep crag and looked out across Loch Craos. The water glittered in the bright morning sun. It looked cool and refreshing, and right then she wanted nothing more than to take a swim in it, or at least to wade at its edge.

She decided she would find Niall and ask him to go with her when a pain gripped her, taking her breath away. She braced herself against the wall with one hand and put the other on her swollen belly. It felt rock hard. After a minute or so the pain receded. Maybe she wouldn't go swimming, she thought. Instead, she decided she would walk down to the village and find Effie. She hadn't walked very far when another pain gripped her, forcing her to stop once again and hold onto the wall of a nearby cottage.

After the second pain had receded, she decided it might be better to return to the keep and send someone for Effie. Before she made it all the way back, yet another pain struck. She bent over, clutching her abdomen. She felt sweat beading on her face. She saw Father Colm step out of the chapel. He was at her side in an instant. He lifted her in his arms, carried her into the keep, and began shouting orders. Katherine smiled briefly, thinking the old priest sounded much like Niall at that moment. Her smile disappeared when yet another pain gripped her.

Within minutes, Edna had Katherine settled in bed and someone had gone to fetch Effie. When she arrived, Effie asked, "Why did ye not call me sooner, my lady?"

"The pains only just started a little while ago," said Katherine.

"Ye've had no other pain?" asked Effie, looking worried.

"Well, I wouldn't say I've had no other pain," snapped Katherine. "My back has hurt since last night, but I have only had a few birthing pains."

Effie relaxed and smiled. "My lady, it is likely ye have been in labor since last night. Birthing pains for some women begin as a back ache."

Even well into labor, several hours passed before the bairn made

her appearance. When she did, Katherine suspected the whole castle could hear her lusty cries. Effie allowed Niall into the room after she had bathed the lady and tucked her into a clean bed, holding her sleeping baby in her arms. Clearly in awe of his tiny daughter, Niall looked almost frightened.

"Would ye like to hold her," asked Katherine, lifting the swaddled bundle to him.

"Nay, I might break her."

"Nonsense," said Katherine, "take her."

He gingerly took the bairn in his huge hands. She nearly fit in the palm of one hand and he cradled her head in the other. She began to squirm and fuss a little. He jiggled her gently and said, "Wheesht, lass." She settled and Niall grinned, looking overly pleased with himself.

He still held her some time later when a quiet knock came at the door. Katherine called, "Come in," and Tomas slipped into the room.

"Come see your new sister," Niall said. Tomas came cautiously forward and stood by Niall.

"She's just a wee thing," said Tomas, sounding surprised. "By the noise she was making, I thought she'd be bigger."

Katherine chuckled and Niall winked at her. "It's the wee ones ye have to be careful of, lad."

Tomas wasn't sure what his parents were laughing at, so he ignored it and asked, "Does she have a name?"

"Not yet," said Katherine.

"Can we name her Mab?"

"Mab is your pony's name," said Niall.

"I know," said Tomas. "I like that name."

"Well, maybe since ye have already given it to your pony, we can pick another name for your sister," said Katherine gently. "What do ye think about the name Beitris? It was your grandmother's name."

Tomas said the name a couple of times, then announced, "Well, it isn't as nice as Mab, but since Mab is taken, Beitris is pretty good."

"Beitris it is, then," said Niall, smiling. He leaned over and kissed Katherine on the cheek. He whispered, "I love ye verra much. Ye will never know how happy I am ye chose me instead of the convent."

About The Author

Ceci started her career as an oncology nurse at a leading research hospital, and eventually became a successful medical writer. In 1991 she married a young Irish carpenter who she met at a friend's wedding. They raised their family in central New Jersey but now live with their dogs and birds in paradise, also known as southwest Florida. With their youngest off to college, Ceci is breaking away from "primary efficacy endpoints" and writing a few "happily ever after's."

Ceci is particularly fond of tiaras so she was delighted to be included in the Queens of Medieval romance. Ceci is also one of the founders of the Guardians of Cridhe, a group of seven incredibly talented authors of Scottish Historical romance. Don't miss their new collection, ***Highland Flames***.

If you enjoyed Highland Solution, you can get to know Tadhg Matheson and Fingal MacIan a bit better in ***Highland Courage***, and ***Highland Intrigue***. You might also enjoy her new Fated Hearts series, including ***Highland Revenge*** (a novella), ***Highland Echoes***, and coming soon ***Highland Angels***.

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The Duncurra series continues…

Highland Courage

Her parents want a betrothal, but Mairead MacKenzie can't get married without revealing her secret and no man will wed her once he knows.

Plain in comparison to her siblings and extremely reserved, Mairead has been called "MacKenzie's Mouse" since she was a child. No one knows the reason for her timidity and she would just as soon keep it that way. When her parents arrange a betrothal to Laird Tadhg Matheson she is horrified. She only sees one way to prevent an old secret from becoming a new scandal.

Tadhg Matheson admires and respects the MacKenzies. While an alliance with them through marriage to Mairead would be in his clan's best interest, he knows Laird MacKenzie seeks a closer alliance with another clan. When Tadhg learns of her terrible shyness and her youngest brother's fears about her, Tadhg offers for her anyway.

Secrets always have a way of revealing themselves. With Tadhg's unconditional love, can Mairead find the strength and courage she needs to handle the consequences when they do?

Highland Intrigue

Lady Gillian MacLennan's clan needs a leader, but the last person on earth she wants as their laird is Fingal Maclan. She can neither forgive nor forget that his mother killed her father, and, by doing so, created Clan MacLennan's current desperate circumstances.

King David knows a weak clan, without a laird, can change quickly from a simple annoyance to a dangerous liability, and he cannot ignore the turmoil. The MacIan's owe him a great debt, so when he makes Fingal MacIan laird of clan MacLennan and requires that he marry Lady Gillian, Fingal is in no position to refuse.

In spite of the challenge, Fingal is confident he can rebuild her clan, ease her heartache and win her affection. However, just as love awakens, the power struggle takes a deadly turn. Can he protect her from the unknown long enough to uncover the plot against them? Or will all be lost, destroying the happiness they seek in each other's arms?

If you enjoyed the Duncurra Series, you might also enjoy the Fated Hearts Series

Highland Revenge

(This novella was first published in Highland Winds – The Scrolls of Cridhe Volume 1)

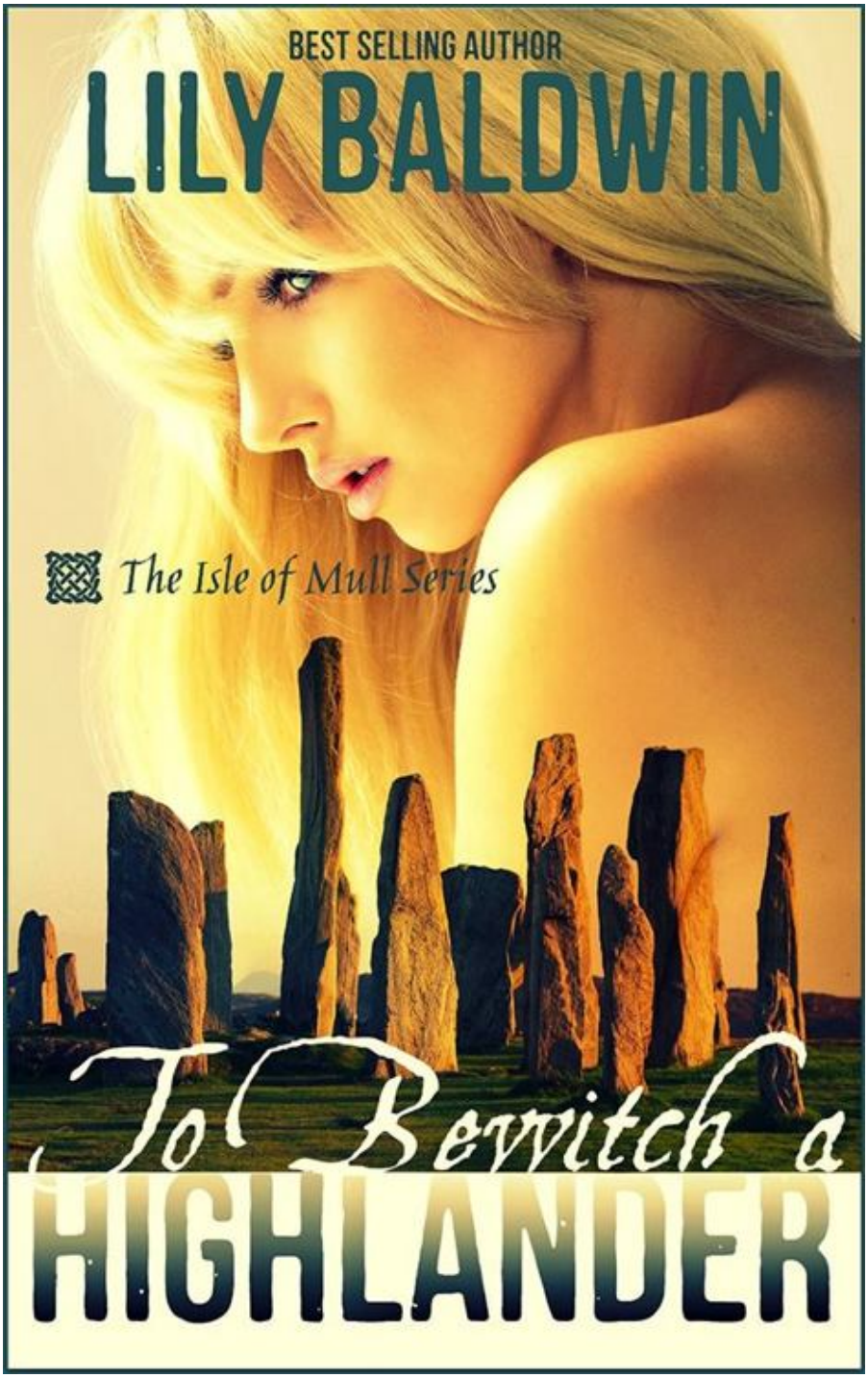
Does he hate her clan enough to visit his vengeance on her? Or will

he listen to her secret and his own heart's yearning?
Hatred lives and breathes between medieval clans who often don't remember why feuds began in the shadowed past.
But Eoin MacKay remembers.
He will never forget how he was treated by Bhaltair MacNicol—the acting head of Clan MacNicol. He was lucky to escape alive, and vows to have revenge.
Years later, as laird of Clan MacKay, he gets his chance when he captures Lady Fiona MacNicol. His desire for revenge is strong but he is beguiled by his captive. Can he forget his stubborn hatred long enough to listen to the secret she has kept for so long? And once he knows the truth, can he show her she is not alone and forsaken? In the end, is he strong enough to fight the combined hostilities and age-old grudges that demand he give her up?

Highland Echos

Love echoes.
Grace Breive is strong and independent because she has to be. She has a wee daughter to care for and, having lost her parents and husband, has no one else on whom she can rely. Driven from the only home she has ever known, she travels to Castle Sutherland to find a grandmother she never knew she had.
As Laird Sutherland's heir, Bram Sutherland understands his obligation to enter into a political marriage for the good of the clan, but he is captivated by the beautiful and resilient young mother.
Will Bram and Grace follow the dictates of their hearts, or will echoes from the past force them apart?

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The Isle of Mull Series
To Bewitch a
HIGHLANDER

To Bewitch A Highlander

Lily Baldwin

To Bewitch a Highlander is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
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This book is dedicated to my beloved husband whose unwavering faith gave me the confidence to push forward. To my daughter who holds me accountable to my dreams. And to my mom and dad—simply, the best parents in the world.

DEDICATION

And to Aunt Lou.

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And a special thank you to Jan and Fred.

Chapter 1

Isle of Mull, Scotland
1263

Ronan motioned for the small band of warriors behind him to halt.

"We are on a fool's hunt, Ronan," Aidan whispered.

Ronan cast Aidan a scowl that would have sent most men to their knees. Aidan stood his ground, but nodded to let Ronan know he understood the warning. On the battlefield, Aidan was one of Ronan's fiercest warriors, but away from the fray, he was easily bored and distracted. More often than not, it was women who distracted and later bored him, but, evidently, their latest mission lacked enough dangerous enticements to hold his interest. Tedium, however, was no excuse for carelessness. Aidan was beginning to try Ronan's limited patience. If his complaints continued, Ronan would personally tie him to a tree and use him as bait to ensnare the trespassers.

Ronan signaled for the men to split up, but motioned for Aidan to follow him. The last thing he wanted at that moment was to endure any more of Aidan's nagging, but the only way to ensure he stayed out of trouble was to keep him close.

"Ronan, 'tis barely spring," Aidan whispered. "The MacLean is an idiot to be sure, but he's not daft enough to think he might conceal his warriors in the forest this time of year."

"Enough," Ronan growled. He had to think, a simple task made harder owing to Aidan's incessant prattling in his ear.

Despite hours of searching they had uncovered no sign of the enemy. He hated to admit it, but Aidan was right. Springtime arrived on the wings of migrating birds, but despite the warm breeze, the trees had yet to fill with leaves. Madness alone would have informed a command to lead the MacLeans into the wood with nothing better than bramble and bare limbs behind which to seek cover, and although they were no account thieves, their chieftain was not entirely deprived of sense. Surely, the brigand, Angus MacLean, knew better. Then again, Angus was aware the MacKinnon clan had twice the warriors and stores, but he was still foolhardy enough to order the occasional raid. No, danger was not imminent, but this in no way excused Aidan's reckless behavior.

"The cottars saw a flash of the MacLean tartan through the trees. Our laird ordered us to flush them out. Instead of griping over being pulled away from Anna's skirts, why don't you keep alert and find me a few MacLeans. Then we can go home."

"Get down," Aidan hissed as he dove to the ground.

Ronan did not hesitate. He lunged behind a tree, but as he peered

around the trunk he saw nothing to warrant an alarm. He raised a quizzical brow at Aidan.

"'Tis the Witch," he whispered, pointing toward a copse of trees.

Amid a slender cluster of birch trees adjacent the forest road stood the Witch of Dervaig. The folds of her tattered and filth covered robes, draped over her bent and crooked form, sent shivers up his spine. The hood of her cloak, always pulled low over her face, surely concealed hideous deformities and festering boils. Ronan exhaled with relief as she hobbled out onto the road.

"I dreamt as a lad that she captured me here in the wood," Aidan said. "I struggled to break away from her hold as her hood fell back, revealing a wart covered,
twisted nose and an evil toothless grin," he grimaced with disgust.

"We've naught to fear. She is gone now," Ronan said as he stood, but he shivered as a chill swept through him, no doubt caused by the icy current of her black heart.

"God's blood," Aidan swore, "why does she not die already? Is she to haunt our island for another three hundred years?"

"The devil owns her soul. She may plague Mull for all eternity," Ronan replied. "Forget the Witch. We've work to do."

"What now?" Aidan asked.

Ronan expelled a long breath. "I'm beginning to agree with you, Aidan. This is a great waste of time. But the laird is not interested in our opinions. Judgments do not safeguard our stores. 'Tis done with the lives of men. We cannot return to Gribun until every patch of forest is searched."

"You're beginning to sound like your father," Aidan said, "which of course means my future is grim. When you become chieftain one day all my fun ends."

"Why?" Ronan asked, "You won't be laird."

"No, but I will be your second."

"Saints preserve us, Aidan, if you are ever my second," Ronan scoffed.

"Jest if you wish, but you trust no one as well as me."

"Aye, I trust you all right. I trust you will be the first to complain."

Ronan made light of Aidan's claim, but it struck truth. He had many fine warriors under his command, but Aidan was his oldest friend. His loyalty never wavered, and he understood better than anyone how to calm Ronan's ire once it raged out of control. Although during times of peace, Aidan drove him to temper more than anyone else.

"What say you to splitting up? We'll cover more ground," Aidan suggested.

Ronan hesitated at first but then agreed. He was as anxious to

return home as his friend but for different reasons. There was no maid waiting for him back at Gribun but rather a mountain of duties, which promised to keep him busy until he arrived in the hereafter. He looked to Aidan who was awaiting his command.

"Cut across the road, but first make sure the hag is not lingering nearby. Follow the river. Stay low and alert. If you find nothing by the time the sun is low in
the sky, meet me near the forest edge on the north side."

Aidan started to walk toward the road, but Ronan grabbed hold of his arm and said, "I know you think this mission is a heap of dung, but do not be careless."

Aidan nodded his consent. Ronan's eyes narrowed as his stare penetrated his friend's perpetually jaunty gaze.

"Aidan, you are a MacKinnon warrior, and your people depend on you.

"I will be thorough and cautious. I assure you, Ronan."

"Go, my friend, and fear not, war with the Norse is at hand. You will be back on the battlefield soon enough."

"I'm counting on it. 'Tis the only way I am going to escape Anna's skirts without marriage," Aidan said with a wink and dashed through the trees.

Ronan watched him peer beyond a tall oak to first check for the Witch. He signaled the road was clear, and then he was gone.

He wondered what it would be like to have his biggest concern be whether to marry his latest conquest. He shook his head as he turned and headed deeper into the thicket. The brambles, although bereft of leaves, possessed sharp spines, but he paid little heed to the pricks that snagged his exposed calves and tugged at the plaid hanging just below his knees as he scouted his surroundings.

A branch snapped behind him. Someone or something was approaching. He dropped to one knee and reached behind his shoulder to grasp the hilt of his sword from the scabbard strapped to his back. The nearby trees and bramble were still, and he heard naught but his own breathing.

He waited, poised and listening. His patience was rewarded as the rustle of twig and branch renewed and drew closer. Then a red deer became visible through the bramble. It was tall with proud antlers. And although lean from the winter months, its meat would be a welcome addition to their stores. Wet leaves newly released from their snowy grave clung to its hooves as it moved cautiously through the forest. Ronan grinned at his luck. He was hunched downwind from his prey, and, as yet, he had not been detected. At least something would come of their trek into the wood.

He cursed the absence of his bow, and his sword would be useless

against the speed of a deer, but the sizable dirk tied to his thigh beneath his plaid might prove sufficient. If he could just get close enough, the stag would be his with one throw. Ronan looked around at the bare trees and cursed under his breath. He was the largest of the MacKinnons but for Dugald. Someone else should have been given this opportunity, someone smaller. Even Dugald, who somehow managed to maneuver his bulk like a man half his size, was better suited for the job.

Ronan stole between the trees, keeping the deer in sight as he did his best to stay low and sidle through the bushes for extra coverage.

"God's blood," he swore as he squeezed through a particularly tight cluster.

Ordinarily, he found his great height and breadth to be an advantage. On the battlefield, his size instilled immediate fear. As the future laird of the MacKinnon, it encouraged the cooperation of his men as did his rather infamous temper, but seldom were they unruly. The MacKinnons were indeed a loving and loyal clan, to each other and to Nathair, Ronan's father. He was a fair and competent laird but formidable when necessary.

Following at a distance, he watched the deer walk toward the shallow ravine at the forest's center. It must have been drawn to the sweet grass, which grew in the space between where the tree line ended and the abyss began. He grinned. The buck was unknowingly walking into the perfect trap. Once at the edge, it would have no place to run but down giving him a clean shot. The deer advanced further. It was almost to the ravine. He silently cut to the edge and tucked himself behind one of the larger trees. Down he peered, observing the depth to be shallower than he remembered. It was nigh the length of three men to the bottom. The fall would not kill someone, but the jagged rocks littering the ravine floor might.

The buck cleared the tree line and began nibbling the tender grasses. Its nose and eyes showed the feast complete deference, but its ears bristled, ever alert for danger's approach. He was a prize to be sure. Reaching his hand beneath the pleats of his kilt, he eased his dirk from its narrow scabbard. Already the sun dipped behind the trees. He needed to hurry. It was almost time to meet his men. He shifted his grip so the point of the blade was pressed between his thumb and forefinger. He eased his arm back, took aim, and started to launch the dirk, but the steel never left his fingertips. A movement to his left captured his attention. In an instant, his gaze shifted and he redirected his deadly aim toward the unknown distraction. But when he saw what snaked his concentration away from the stag he froze not believing his own eyes.

Not ten strides away stood a slip of a girl with radiant golden hair,

which shone even in the dim forest light. The string of a narrow and intricately carved bow was pulled taught against her cheek, arrow at the ready, aimed at his prize. And as far as he could tell, she did not realize he was there.

She had to be one of the fair folk, but he didn't know whether she was a threat. As though she sensed his gaze, her head turned, and their eyes met. Then with lightning speed, the girl shifted her weapon, and he stared at the lethal tip of her arrow and into wide eyes, which glinted like steel swords. He jerked back, his footing lost. Twisting to the side, he tried to regain his balance, but the ground at the edge crumbled beneath his weight, pulling him over the brink. As he fell, his eyes connected once more with the now terror-filled gaze of the girl who screamed as he plunged downward. He landed with a thud, and a sharp pain cut through his skull as the world turned black.

Chapter 2

Shoney raced through the woods with her heart pounding in her ears and her mind spinning with terror. She did not know what scared her more, the prospect of the giant gaining consciousness and chasing her down or the approaching darkness. She should have returned home earlier, but all she had to show after a full day's hunt were a couple scrawny pheasants and a red grouse; then she spotted the stag.

She shot a quick glance back to check if he followed, but the darkness obscured the forest. An advantage Shoney knew he would welcome. Not for a moment did she believe *he* was afraid of the dark. Even now, he might be trailing just behind her, like a wolf stalking a panicked fawn that had lost its mother. As longing for her mother's protective embrace filled her heart, she realized it was an apt description. Her mother, Brethia, had died three years before, leaving Shoney with a wound impossible to heal. Without her, she was alone in the world—hated, feared, and alone.

Shoney glimpsed light ahead and surged forward to hasten her passing from the gloom of the wood onto the open moors where her way would be lit by the final efforts of the setting sun. When she at last cleared the trees, she knelt straightaway to the ground and readied her bow. If only she had her sword. Her eyes scanned the tree line and the surrounding hills, which were painted with the violets of dusk. As far as she could tell, she was alone. Even so, she held her breath, expecting the giant to launch out of the woods and attack.

After several peaceful moments passed, she lowered her weapon. He did not give chase and likely remained on the ravine floor in forced slumber. Now she need only contend with the approaching shadows, but despite how she longed to race home to safety, she dare not run without the coverage of the trees. Too many clansfolk could spy her crossing the open moors. She stood up and twisted her strong, young back to the left and then hunched her shoulders. The wind blew her hair across her face, and she swore loudly, remembering to pull the hood of her cloak down low past her brow to mask her true identity from the villagers.

"Who's afraid of the Witch of Dervaig?" she sneered, "everyone."

She stooped over once more and hobbled off toward home. Concealed beneath the folds of her cloak, nightfall did not frighten her as much: it was always dark under the cloak. Besides, her mind churned with images of deep brown eyes and wide shoulders, which also proved a good distraction from her fear.

He had seen her.

No one had ever seen her before. The villagers knew her only as the crippled and terrifying Witch of Dervaig. She grimaced as she imagined her mother's fury. Brethia never ceased warning her about the wicked prejudice of the Gaels and was forever reminding her that their only protection from the clan was concealment under the Witch's cloak. But he had taken her by surprise. One moment, she was aiming her arrow at the heart of a stag, the next she was staring at a man—an enormous man. Before her mother died, she warned Shoney about men in particular, paying special attention to their salacious appetites for young women.

"Fool," she spat.

Why did she not flee the forest when they first spotted her near the road? She almost laughed out loud when the giant and his companion dove for cover as they hid from the Witch of Dervaig. Little did they know it was not a toothless hag concealing her gruesome facade beneath the dark folds, but rather a young woman more frightened of them than they could ever be of a wrinkled old witch. She overheard his name. It was Ronan, but she could not remember the little one's name.

"Mother of all," she swore. What did their names matter?

She cursed again; her mind was racing and fixating on the most trivial points. She had to face the magnitude of her mistakes. She should not have risked lingering in the wood when she knew there were men nearby, and she never, ever should have chanced removing her hood. No buck was worth discovery, even one as grand as that which had been in her sights.

"Damn him," she swore as she lamented the wealth of meat and the fine pelt lost because of their chance meeting.

Finally, she glimpsed her home outlined against the twilight. Situated near the cliffs on the western edge of the island, her hut stood just beyond the Dervaig Stones. Centuries before, the stones towered above the earth, in a long line. The women of Shoney's descent worshiped amid the tall stones, but war and weathering brought about the collapse of many. The alignment's former glory lived on in stories passed from generation to generation. To Shoney they were sisters asleep on an earthly bed, and the power of the stones remained undiminished in her heart.

She shivered as the last light vanished and darkness fully ascended. Her pulse began to race as she tried to limp faster, but her foot caught on a jutting rock, and she stumbled, landing on the game birds, which hung from her belt.

Mother of all, could this day just end?

Hobbling past the Dervaig Stones, her resolve and strength began to return. Darkness had always been her weakness, even when her

mother was alive. Tomorrow she would pray again to the goddess of shadows for courage to face her fear.

She opened the heavy wooden door and passed into her small stone hut. The oversized entrance, better suited for a large abode, was fashioned with intimidation in mind. Dragons and other fierce animals were carved into the surface, and in the center was the head of a serpent baring sharp fangs. It was one of many devices the women of Shoney's descent used over the years to stave off harassment from the clan. Feeling the weight of it and hearing the loud thud as it closed behind her gave Shoney the reassurance needed to rid her mind of the last dwindling notions of terror. She swept the heavy folds of the Witch's cloak off her shoulders and breathed a sigh of relief as she hung it on a peg and turned away. It would be ignored until she ventured out again.

In the center of her hut, she knelt by the fire pit. Soon warm crackling flames illuminated her surroundings, but the comforts of home provided only a momentary respite from her troubled thoughts. Something unprecedented had occurred: she had been seen. She now existed to the outside world.

Unable to reconcile herself to the reality of the day's events, she could not begin to consider the consequences sure to arise from her carelessness. Would this Ronan connect the girl in the forest to the Witch? She removed the hood of the cloak to shoot the stag but not the cloak itself. In one day, all of life's certainties had receded into memory, and she faced a new world, one in which the secret of the Witch of Dervaig might have been discovered at last.

Perhaps right at that very moment, the giant, backed by the might of his whole army, was crossing the moors, armed with swords and torches. They would drag her out from the safety of her hut and burn her alive.

She shook her head. She was being foolish; even if Ronan were to figure out who she was, nothing would change. For generations, her forbears disguised themselves as the Witch, and the clan had yet to muster the courage to purge their island of her so-called black soul. Whether crone or maid, they would still be afraid…she hoped.

This Ronan, despite his great size, hid from the Witch in the forest. He feared her as much as anyone else.

Ronan.

His name echoed in her mind. She could not recall why it sounded so familiar, and then she remembered. Her mother gleaned details about clan life from stories told by her lover. She always said there were only two good things that came from her brief love affair: Shoney and knowledge. As it turned out, a deeper understanding of their neighbors was Shoney's only legacy from her father. He fled

Brethia's side before Shoney's birth, and Brethia had refused to speak of him except when instructing Shoney in the ways of the clan. She asserted it was essential to their survival.

Her father described two competing clans living on their island, the MacLeans to the south and the MacKinnons to the north. According to MacKinnon law, Shoney's home was on their land, although she was certainly not governed by their law or by their leader whom Brethia called laird or chieftain. If Shoney remembered her lessons correctly, the laird of the MacKinnon was named Nathair, and he had a son whom he called Ronan.

Her eyes widened. She had indirectly rendered the future chieftain of the Clan MacKinnon unconscious. She remembered how he looked as she peeked at him over the ravine edge. He was lying on his back, and beneath his head gathered a small pool of blood. She thought at first he was dead, but then he groaned, causing her such surprise that she scurried back and darted into the woods and did not stop running until she cleared the forest.

She shrugged off her fear. Mayhap he did die, and she had naught for which to worry.

It was no less than he deserved. She tracked the buck and took first aim. Besides, he was of the clan, a Gael. The clansfolk had branded all of Shoney's ancestors as witches, long before the legend of the Witch of Dervaig had taken root, but they were not witches. They were Picts.

She doubted whether Ronan even knew of the ancient people who lived and died on her island long before the Gaels came to stake their claim. The Picts were a magnificent people. The women fought as warriors alongside their men. Together, they safeguarded their kingdom against the Roman, Angle, and Viking campaigns, but it was the Gaels who finally broke through their defenses. Their arrival marked the beginning of the end for the Picts. They infiltrated Pictish lands and society with the goal of establishing a Scottish crown, and in time, they succeeded.

Kenneth MacAlpin was the son of a Gaelic warrior and a Pictish princess, and, because the Pictish throne was inherited though the maternal line, he stood in striking distance from the crown. When called upon, his Pictish mother legitimated his claim, believing in his commitment to the Picts. Then he met his mark in battle defeating all other challengers and became king. Once in power, he betrayed his mother by ruling that the crown would pass to the closest male relation on the father's side. In the end, he demonstrated his true allegiance by ensuring a Gael sat upon the throne even upon his death.

Only with further bloodshed could the Picts take back the throne, and after centuries of war, they had little fight left. Besides a few

minor uprisings, the Picts ceased to rebel, ultimately ushering in the age of their own demise. They had to submit to a new language, a new law, and a new god, or they were banished and became recluses like Shoney's mother and her mother's mother, going back centuries. Little evidence remained to prove the Picts even existed. It was as if they were consumed by the Gaels, absorbed into the body of Gaelic tradition. Only women like Shoney remained trained in the art of healing and charms, celebrating the gods of the land, sea, and sky, but even she could only speak the Gaelic language. Pictish had long since been forgotten.

Not only was Ronan of Gaelic descent, but to make matters worse, the MacKinnons were the direct descendants of King MacAlpin himself. Shoney's hand closed into a tight fist. Fury took hold of her every time she remembered this ancient betrayal. As usual she found herself wishing for something to strike, but now she could imagine her target—Ronan's face.

Shoney's forebears suffered centuries of prejudice and abuse, but all that stopped with Tharain. She was Shoney's great-great-grandmother and the first to don the cloak and feign the extravagant hobble of the Witch of Dervaig. A legend was then born. Tharain hid her own daughter from sight, and when her daughter grew they took turns using the cloak. The villagers only saw the Witch, but all the while it was a disguise used by both women and then passed down from generation to generation.

As a young girl, Shoney remembered never being permitted beyond the confines of their back garden, which faced out to sea. Her mother draped herself in the ugly folds of the witch's cloak and bid her stay put before she set out to hunt or gather fresh herbs. She remembered asking her mother—whose beauty rivaled the most vibrant sunset—why she wore the cloak and made herself appear ancient and grotesque. She told Shoney she terrified the people as an old crone. She said it was a trick she learned from her own mother. A repulsive hag evoked greater fear in the hearts and minds of the villagers, which ensured they kept their distance.

Although not everyone stayed away, they had the occasional midnight visitor.

Every now and then when the moon was high, there came a soft rapping on the door. Her mother would sweep the cloak over her shoulders and motion for Shoney to hide. With a candle in hand, Shoney climbed down into a deep dug-out concealed by a trap door beneath the table, which was built by Tharain for the purpose of concealing her own beloved daughter. Shoney sat very still and listened. It was always the same. A woman had stolen away in the night to seek out the aid of the Witch of Dervaig. Her monthly flow

had stopped; her monthly flow would not stop; her child was ill; her husband refused to pick up a plow; faeries were stealing their goat's milk. Depending on the complaint, her mother would whisper charms or send her home with potions or poultices.

One night, Shoney climbed out from her hiding place after hearing the thud of the great door, signifying the woman's departure. She asked her mother how the clansfolk could hate them so but still come to beg for relief.

"They come in secret," her mother answered. "'Tis a secret they keep from their men, from each other, even from themselves. They come because they feel I am their last hope."

She held in her hands a bowl with murky water, the remains of a potion. Shoney knew she would go outside and pour it into the ground among the sacred stones as a prayer of gratitude to the Mother of all for the power to heal. As she opened the door to leave she turned to Shoney and said, "They come because their god does not hear the voices of women."

"If they will not speak of their visit to anyone, why must I hide?"

"Because you are precious to me. 'Tis the duty of all mothers to protect their children."

Shoney scowled at her mother in frustration. Then Brethia put down the bowl and cupped Shoney's cheeks in her hands. "I know you feel like a bird whose wings have been clipped, but the cage that awaits you out there I cannot save you from forever. You will be desired for your beauty, but your name demands you be loathed. The blending of desire and hate will create deception, desperation, and pain. I will shield you from this fate for as long as I live, but after I die, it will be up to you." Her mother placed a gentle kiss on her forehead and smiled her beautiful smile, and then she left.

For a moment, Shoney felt her mother's presence again. She saw her elegant, slim figure cross through the doorway and her blond hair shimmer in the moonlight like ropes of silver. Her mother had been so exquisite to behold, but she disguised this well; the clansfolk only ever saw an old crone, with a bent back, covered from head to toe in a dirty and tattered cloak.

When her mother died Shoney vowed to honor her wishes. She took the cloak down from its peg and swept it over her shoulders and pulled the hood low over her head. With a bent back, she mimicked her mother's walk, and so the witch lived on. The clan knew nothing of Shoney's real existence, until now.

Shoney released a sigh as she turned her attention to a large, intricately carved wooden table, which dominated her small quarters. She began to empty her pockets of the herbs she gathered that day. She gazed upon the series of small glass bottles and leather pouches,

littering the table's surface. Each one possessed healing powers to safeguard one's body or soul from harm. They were curative and soothing, but because they were made by her hand, the clan considered each one to be an act of witchcraft.

"So much waste," she sighed.

Shoney was a gifted healer, and she knew she could bring relief to many who suffered, if only they welcomed her.

And then you wouldn't be alone.

The words came unbidden to her mind, and she

chased them away with a shake of her head. She did not need anyone.

Her lips curled in a wry smile. Potion making was not her only talent. She inherited a special gift. Like her mother before her, and like all of the women of Shoney's descent, she could see beyond what her eyes allowed. She had visions. A warning flash of white light preceded each one, and then Shoney gave herself to her dreams. Truths were revealed and fortunes told, but the visions came to her; she did not control them, which meant she could not see everything that had yet to be, or else she might have known to keep her head cloaked today when taking aim at the buck.

Shoney exhaled a slow breath as she glanced around her empty house. The silence at times seemed more deafening than the crashing surf at high tide. She knew no potions or chants to cure that which ailed her most—her unrelenting loneliness. She imagined Ronan for a moment in his home surrounded by a multitude of friends and family, laughter and warmth. Once again she was filled with rage. She felt consumed by it, and, acting on impulse, she rushed outside and cried out in the direction of the MacKinnon village of Gribun.

"My gods are born of this land," she yelled as she stomped her foot on the brown earthen floor. Then she twirled in a circle with her arms raised high as if straining to touch the canopy of bright stars above her head.

"My gods are of the trees and sky and of the ocean that surrounds us all."

Then she ceased her spinning and whispered, "I am of this land, Ronan, son of Nathair, future laird of the MacKinnon. You are not."

Chapter 3

Ronan stared past the jagged cliffs toward the crisp, white swells of the sea and watched the waves roll inland, but nothing filled his mind for long before images of long golden hair stole his every thought.

"Hellfire," he swore as he spurred his mount to ride faster over the wet, soft earth.

"Tell me again, Ronan, why I am not as this moment tending to the plant of the north fields as your father commanded?"

Ronan had forgotten his friend trailing reluctantly at the rear. He turned in his seat and gave Aidan a look of displeasure.

"You can't blame me for thinking this is all a little…unbelievable," Aidan said.

"So you think I'm lying. Is that it?" Ronan snapped.

"No, you are no liar, Ronan. But you are my oldest friend, and you will be laird one day, and so I hesitate using the word *mad*," Aidan chuckled, irritating Ronan further.

They rode on in silence for which he was grateful. The purple bracken spread its springtime fingers over the sloping moors in thick beds of color, only to taper off as it met the hardness of the isle's rocky coastline. He followed the violet color to the cliffs to see if she hid in one of the many caves the raging seas had carved out of the towering rock. He reached the bluffs and did not hesitate directing his horse down the steep slope. As he descended, a nagging feeling started to chip away at his resolve. His pursuit of the girl had already taken him on several fruitless missions.

Over the past fortnight, he combed the hills and forests of Northern Mull and found no trace of her, and when he exhausted all possibilities, he broadened his search. He traveled south to where MacKinnon lands abutted those of the MacLeans, a boundary marked by Benmore Mountain. The tall peak surged out of the earth and awarded anyone willing to climb to its top a magnificent view of the island. His feet followed a path up the steep height of the mountain to the windy summit where he scanned every direction, foolishly searching for long flaxen hair.

If she wasn't in the caves, then he might have to admit defeat. There was simply no other place to look. He pictured her lovely form shivering and frigid, lying on a rock strewn cavern floor, her golden hair wet and tangled with seaweed. His grip tightened on the reins as concern for her safety mounted in his mind. But then his hand moved to his head where he felt the slight lump that remained from his fall in the woods, and he decided she deserved to be little cold and wet. She

had after all left him to bleed to death.

"Ronan, why are we here? What sort of girl would make her home in a cave? Even if she was down here, would you really want to be better acquainted with the strange cave girl?"

Ronan's musings were interrupted by Aidan's jest. Once again, he had forgotten his friend's presence, but despite Aidan's humor, Ronan witnessed a look of trepidation flitter across his face, which forced Ronan to admit to his own reckless behavior. He was pushing their horses as if heading into battle and steering them down treacherous ravines with little thought to the welfare of beast or man. Ronan pulled on the reins and brought his horse to a halt.

"I know you think that I am insane, but she is out there, somewhere, and I must find her."

Aidan rolled his eyes and raised his face to the clear blue sky as if beseeching a heavenly body to intervene and save him. Then he sighed and once again addressed Ronan.

"It was a dream. You must listen to me. She does not exist."

"And this crack on my head, I suppose you are going to claim that I dreamt this as well."

"I know you fell. It was I who found you asleep like a babe, lying in a pool of blood and drool."

He gave Aidan a look that would cause most men to doubt themselves, but Aidan didn't flinch.

"I'm telling you, Ronan, it was a vision, nothing more."

Ronan raised his reins to give them a snap, but Aidan gripped his forearm, stopping him. "You must listen to reason. You lost your footing and smashed your head against a rock, and in your sleep you conjured visions of beauty." Aidan lips curled into a mischievous smile, "Or mayhap the fair folk took some pleasure at your expense."

Ronan shook his head. At first glance, the radiance of her hair, which shone like burnished gold, and the blaze of her steel gray eyes gave the impression of magic's imprint, but then as he fell he saw round fearful eyes and heard her piercing scream. Faeries were strangers to both fear and surprise. He kicked his horse into a gallop, but Aidan was relentless, and he soon caught up to Ronan still intent on persuading him to forget the girl. Only Ronan couldn't. For the past fortnight he thought of nothing else.

"I'm telling you, beautiful maidens do not just appear as if from thin air in the middle of the forest. 'Tis not so easy as that, or else every man would bide his time in the thicket waiting for a wife."

"Laugh at my expense one more time, Aidan, and you will regret it."

"Alright, I yield," Aidan said as he raised both hands in mock surrender. "But, friend, let me ask you this. If this maid of, as you say,

unspeakable beauty just happened to be in the woods hunting—a task often undertaken by women," Aidan added dryly, "how did you manage to fall into the ravine?"

"I told you already, Aidan. I thought I was alone. I had the stag in my sights, and then out of nowhere she was there, an armed and beautiful woman. Imagine my surprise. Then she turned her arrow on me, and the earth gave way beneath my feet."

Aidan's badgering affected Ronan, but not in the way Aidan hoped. Barely restrained irritation surged within him seeking release. If Aidan said one more thing to him about dreams and faeries as if Ronan was some addle-minded old woman, then he was going to show Aidan exactly why he needed to be afraid.

Ronan stood almost a full head taller than his friend and his shoulders were nigh twice as large. He briefly glanced at Aidan who had finally quieted, and so he must have sensed that he had pushed him too far. Anger came easily to Ronan—he knew it and so did everyone else, and that moment was no exception. His muscles stiffened with rage. Sure, he was overreacting, but to hell with it. He had been in a foul mood ever since he awoke with a screaming headache amid the rocks on the ravine floor, surrounded by his clansmen whose concerned expressions turned to taunting grins when he told them that he had not been attacked but had merely fallen. His pride was still as sore as his skull. He kept a little dignity by refraining from telling anyone but Aidan about the girl, but now, he wished he had kept it to himself entirely.

Aidan gave Ronan an encouraging smile and said, "Well, if she does exist we'll find her. Come along. Let's have a look in the caves."

"I don't know what annoys me more, when you fight me or when you coddle me," Ronan growled.

As quick as Ronan was to anger, Aidan was as patient. In fact, Ronan loathed admitting how much he relied on his friend to keep his own temper in check.

They jumped from their mounts as they descended the steep incline, which sloped to the water's edge. As they tramped down Aidan asked after the beauty of the mysterious maiden. Ronan looked over at his friend and saw a wicked gleam in his eye.

Ronan smiled, "I hate to make you jealous, but let's just say you may no longer be the village beauty."

Aidan chuckled at his friend's good natured ribbing as Ronan knew he would. Everyone goaded Aidan about his fair looks.

"Humph," Aidan said. "The men pester me about my pretty face when all you have to do is cast a girl a smile and she becomes as limpid and pliant as a baby lamb. The only difference between you and me, Ronan, is that most of the time you ignore the women who

fawn over you, which, by the by, I will never understand."

Ronan snorted his disapproval. He and Aidan were nothing alike in appearance or temperament. Aidan's curly hair was black, and Ronan once overheard Aidan's eyes described by a maid as bluer than the sky. And much to the amusement of the other warriors, his features were fine like a woman's.

In contrast, Ronan's square jaw and deep set brown eyes, which glowed amber when he was angry, were anything but feminine. There was truth, however, to the latter end of Aidan's claim. All of the mothers in the clan considered Aidan to be the greatest threat to their daughters' virtues; whereas, being the laird's son, Ronan was constantly pursued by maids and their mothers, seeking his special favor.

He had little time for women between training the warriors and helping his father take care of the clan, which is why he was utterly bewildered by his own response to this girl. He was ignoring his duties, and if that wasn't bad enough, he enlisted the aid of one of his father's most trusted warriors who should be supervising the planting of crops vital to the very survival of the clan.

Ronan stopped in his tracks. "You are right, Aidan. This is madness."

"Praise the Lord, you've come to your senses…er…I meant to say are you sure you wish to abandon your search for this huntress who is as real and alive as you or me?"

"You won't be alive much longer if you do not wipe that grin off your face. Better yet," Ronan snarled his fist at the ready, "come closer and let me do it for you."

"You don't need that, friend. Put it away. I've no desire for a walloping this day." Aidan sighed, "So what would you have me do now?"

Ronan stood unmoving. He knew not what he wanted, though he knew for certain what he *should* do. He should return to the village, to his responsibilities. He considered all the reasons why he needed to give up, yet he refused them all. His actions were contrary to his duties and his own sense, but he could not turn back knowing that she was out there, somewhere. She was a flesh and blood woman, and he would stop at nothing to find her.

"No, I will carry on, but your part is finished. Return to the village and do my father's bidding. But tell no one of this."

Aidan nodded his consent. "Do not stay away long. Your clan needs you, and your father will soon wonder at your whereabouts…if he hasn't already."

Once alone, Ronan was free to move at his own pace. He entered the

first cave and traversed its full length, searching behind every rock and within even the smallest alcove. Despite her larger than life presence, she had been slight of build. She could easily hide in the low shadows. As he searched, he once again wondered about her identity.

He knew every maid from Gribun to Benmore Mountain, but he could not recall ever meeting her—an occasion he was sure would have been burned forever into exquisite memory. He was also certain that she lived outside the protection of a clan. Why else would she be alone in the woods hunting of all things? Although he still harbored some annoyance over being left for dead, he couldn't help but admire her bravery. But then the image of the unwavering huntress soon gave way to the girl with wide, frightened eyes. Her unguarded vulnerability touched him. He wanted to take her into his arms right at that moment and stroke the soft loveliness of her hair and her silken skin. He would shield her from ever knowing fear again. But where was she? Who was she?

He dismissed the notion of her being one of the fair folk. Her emotional display revealed her humanity. He also momentarily toyed with the idea that she was a weapon of the MacLeans—a decoy to make men lustful and fall into ravines, but this seemed more implausible than the first. Her existence was his only certitude, and if she existed, then she could be found.

He exited another cave and turned his back to scan the ridges of the cliffs above to place his location on the coast, but nothing was familiar. Only a small region of Northern Mull remained unknown to his clan, the western cliffs of the Witch of Dervaig. A chill coursed down his spine as he realized his proximity to her lair.

Imagining her evil visage, he started as he heard a splash. He gazed out to sea, but the waves were gently lapping undisturbed at the rocks. Then he heard another splash and realized the sound was emanating from further down the coast. He wished to turn away and return home, but his desire to find the girl smothered his fear. He took a deep breath. The smell of salt and seaweed was pungent and rich, and the sun dipped low in the sky, illuminating everything with its blinding reflection. He climbed over several jagged boulders and across little gullies of water in the direction of the noise. Almost losing his balance, he lumbered over slick rocks that would be far beneath the water's surface when the tides came in. He pulled himself atop a large boulder that dominated the area, hoping to find a decent vantage point. But just as he rounded the surface, he spotted trim pale legs disappearing beneath the waters of a wide pool at the boulder's base.

The pool gave him pause with its splendor. Several boulders were positioned in a perfect circle, which gave shape to the pool, and the

darkness of the water attested to its impressive depth and also concealed the diver. He waited, but the person in question had yet to resurface. For a moment, his unease returned. The swimmer might be the Witch, but he had seen youthful legs, not those of an old crone.

Ronan sat perched on the rock, his concern mounting with every passing moment. Whoever was down there, he was certain, had met with trouble. Perhaps a loose rock shifted, pinning them to the sea bed, and at that moment they struggled to break free. Ronan stood and ripped off his belt, plaid, and sword, leaving them in a pile on the rock. He kept his dirk sheathed and strapped to his thigh lest the situation demand a blade, whether to cut the victim free or to save himself if the swimmer proved to be the Witch in disguise. He filled his lungs and dove into the icy waters.

Shoney gripped a large rock with one hand to keep from rising to the surface and was hurriedly scooping handfuls of Dulse with the other, putting the slimy clusters into the sack hanging about her neck. Dulse was her favorite seaweed. Its translucent pink color was hard to spot, but it grew in bushels at the bottom of her pool. If infused in a bath, it soothed sore limbs, and its oil cleansed the skin, clearing away unsightly dry patches. Satisfied she had gathered enough, she released the stone and swooshed her arms, swirling in a circle. Her hair fanned out, covering her face and wrapping around her waist.

The sting from the icy water subsided so that she could truly enjoy the feel of being submersed. The bottom of the deep pool gleamed with smooth white rocks, which seemed to light the murky water. She was enclosed inside rocks directly below her home where she knew none of the clansfolk would ever dare to venture, allowing her to leave behind the Witch's cloak and every other stitch of clothing for that matter. Nothing delighted her more than to feel the rush of cold water over her bare limbs. Nothing made her feel more alive, but she was running out of breath and knew she had to surface.

Her feet touched down on the bottom, and she bent her knees, pushing against the white stones to hasten her swim to the surface, but she did not surge through the water as expected. Large hands grabbed her from above, blocking her momentum. She seized with panic as she flailed against her captor's grip. The water churned, bubbling from her efforts, but she was powerless against the strong arms that wrapped around her from behind and pulled her against the unyielding hardness of a man's chest. Every corded ridge of muscle pressing against her naked back shifted as he pushed off the bottom, propelling them both toward the surface.

They emerged from the depths, and he pulled them to the edge of the pool. Shoney sucked air into her lungs. Too long had she been

submersed and now felt dizzy. Despite her reeling head, she lunged to escape the hands still grasping her shoulders, but his hold only tightened. Then, for the first time, she tilted her head back to look upon her captor.

"You," she exclaimed. "What are *you* doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here?" he said. "This is my island. What are *you* doing here?"

"Taking a bath," she gritted.

She could not believe the giant, the one called Ronan, was in *her* pool. How dare he invade her rightful territory. Fury consumed her but also terror. Not only was she unarmed, but he was even larger than she first realized.

"I am finished now," she said. "So release your grip, and I will be on my way."

"A bath she says."

He turned her around in his arms so she faced him. Then he wrenched the sack from around her neck and threw it into the water. Shoney watched as it sunk beneath the surface. "I have been searching the whole island for you for a fortnight only to find you nigh drowning, leaving me no choice but to dive in to save you."

"Save me? Is that what you thought? That I was drowning." She could not help laughing, but stopped when his hand slid down the curve of back.

Shoney was suddenly very aware of her state of undress. Her curves were concealed from his eyes by the water, but what he could not see surely he could feel as his arms pressed her close. She gasped as she felt the contours of his muscles shift against her skin. The heat of his body provided warmth against the frigid water, and his arms seemed to touch more than just her waist. They reached beyond her physical form, satisfying a craving for contact, which solitude had entrenched deep within her heart. He was powerful and intoxicating, and her response to him was shocking. She never imagined a man would feel so good, so strong, but she knew it had to be wrong. Shouldn't she be outraged? She had to escape his hold. Her hands pressed against his wide chest as she thrust away from him, but he wouldn't budge.

"Let me go, this is indecent," she snapped.

"No more indecent than leaving me to die, lass. I was only trying to save you."

"The only saving I need is from you," she hissed through gritted teeth. "Release me. You have no claim over me or my body as I am neither your wife nor your whore." She renewed her struggles and shrieked, "Let go of me."

His grip loosened slightly, and she felt the warmth of his breath as his head dipped close to hers. His hand swept the length of her torso

and then gently caressed her cheek.

"I know I need to let go of you," he whispered. "I know that I am disgracing you as well as myself, but I cannot bring myself to do so."

She met his smoldering gaze. His lips were but a whisper away from hers. Try as she might, she could not take a deep breath. Her quick, shallow breathing was unnerving. And then as he pressed her body into his, her breathing was forgotten completely as was the cold water that encircled them, the crash of the waves, and the call of the birds. All she was aware of was his eyes, the closeness of his mouth, and the racing of her heart. He slowly lowered his lips, taking possession of the soft skin just below her ear. She closed her eyes, feeling a strange heat at the place where his lips had been. His hot kisses trailed down the length of her neck. The heat spread like languid fire throughout her body.

She had never felt the strength of a man's hands on her skin. Nor had she ever known the tenderness of a kiss. Her breathing quickened. Her body felt like it was swelling, preparing to burst, and she liked it. She pressed herself closer and felt the crushing strength of his muscles as her fingers explored his form. Her hands swept down his powerful arms, sliding over muscled ridges. And then they traveled down past his lean waist to stroke the length of his hard thigh, but instead of smooth, wet skin, her fingers touched something cold and sharp.

Her eyes snapped open, and her senses returned with a strength that would have knocked her over had it not been for the water and the support of his caressing hands.

Mother of all, what spell was this?

He was even more dangerous than she first imagined, for he could control her thoughts and her body. She had to break away from his embrace. Her hand returned to his thigh, only this time she had no intention of stroking his skin. She seized his dirk from its sheath and with a practiced hand she thrust the pointed end of the blade beneath his chin. She smiled ruefully at the small droplet of blood that appeared beneath the dagger's point.

"You keep your blade sharp. I thank you for this kindness."

His eyes darkened and narrowed as his stare grew menacing. She faltered only for a moment but long enough for him to seize her hand and snatch the knife from her grasp. He pushed her from him, and she watched as his strong arms effortlessly pulled his large frame from the water. The muscles that rippled along his legs and across his back and shoulders shone in the sun. He turned to face her, and she saw golden brown hair wet and slick across his bronzed chest as it tapered in a line down his hard, flat stomach and further still. Shoney jerked her head away as crimsoned heat covered her face.

"Do not play at being the lamb when just moments ago you nearly

slit my throat," he said.

"I was simply trying to break free from that stronghold you call a body," she snapped.

Shoney blushed again when she remembered what transpired between them before she made the play for his dirk. Her mother warned her about the lustful appetites of men, but what of her own hunger? She hung her head in shame and told him to look away so that she could get out of the water.

"Am I not to have the same opportunity to feast my eyes on your lovely form as you have done mine?"

"Turn away, and stop looking at me like that," She insisted.

As soon as he faced away, she swam to the opposite side of the pool where she had left her clothing and leapt out of the water. She donned her white linen kirtle and faded gray tunic, which she quickly belted before she fastened her cloak in place. She turned to face him and defiantly returned his glare. They were on opposite sides of the pool, and she had the advantage.

She spun around and leapt to the ground. He would have to cross the pool fully clothed and armed or backtrack to the coastline to find a pathway over the cliffs; whereas, she was only a stone's throw from an easy incline to the top. Once on open land, she might outrun him. His giant body, although strong, was not ideal for running, and she was fast. She hurried to the slope and began making her way up the cliff side. Her hands found holds that she used to pull herself upward. She was almost to the top—to freedom. She dared not look behind her, knowing that to do so would only slow her progress, and she needed every precious second to ensure her escape. Her hand reached the top of the cliff, and she fumbled around for the tip of an embedded rock on the surface to grip.

"Damn," she swore as her hand found something strong to grasp, but it was not a rock. It was a large foot.

There was no time for her to react. He reached down, snatched her up and threw her over his shoulder. She screamed in protest and pounded her fists into his back.

"Fool," he hissed.

He shifted her in his arms so that he cradled her and clamped one of his giant hands across her mouth.

"Be silent, or we are both doomed," he whispered. Then he sprinted away, keeping close to the coastline.

Terror mounted in her mind. There must have been something terrible after them to instill fear in a man as large and capable as Ronan, but she was constrained against his chest with no view of what lay behind. Then he released her mouth and positioned her back over his shoulder, vexing her to no end that he could lift her as though she

weighed no more than a sack of wool. It was a humiliating, not to mention jarring, way to be carried, but at least now she could have a look at what gave chase.

She mustered her courage and raised her head to glance behind, but all she saw was her hut fading in the distance. She was confused. There was nothing there. But then she realized what had evoked such terror in her brave, oversized warrior: He was fleeing from the Witch of Dervaig. She fought to keep from bursting with laughter. To think the very thing from which he fled was at that moment draped over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

When the hut was no longer in sight, Ronan stopped and put her down. "You foolish girl," he scolded. "You almost wandered right into the Witch's lair." Shoney pinched herself to maintain an impassive expression. *The Witch's Lair*—it was just so absurd.

"Whatever do you mean?" she said as she did her best to feign wide-eyed innocence.

"Back there was the hut of the Witch of Dervaig. How is it you have not heard of her?"

"Oh, of course I have. Oh dear, was that really her hut? I had no idea," she said.

He released her and took a step back. "Enough talk. I want you to tell me who are you. I want a name."

Shoney's mind raced. She knew she could not tell him the truth. Her Pictish name might incite too many questions, but what name would he believe? She could clearly not claim to be a MacKinnon, but she needed a Gaelic name.

"I am Bridget, Bridget MacLean."

Ronan released a rush of air, "You *are* a MacLean."

He closed what little gap separated them and grabbed her upper arms, lifting her in the air until her eyes were level with his.

"Why are you on Mackinnon soil?" he sneered, "to lure the future chieftain on a fool's chase for weeks? Is my village right now under attack while I hunt the MacLean's prettiest whore?"

With each question his grip tightened, and his voice rose. Shoney knew she had chosen the wrong lie. She winced in pain as his hands squeezed her arms with such ferocity she felt that in a matter of seconds she would hear them snap likes twigs. She had to placate him somehow; the throbbing was so great that it brought stinging tears to her eyes.

"No one knows I'm here." She uttered the words through gritted teeth against the pain. "I ran away."

He shook her, and she cried out.

"Do not lie to me, girl. I will give you no mercy if you lie to me."

"No MacLean knows where I am. I swear to you." It wasn't a lie. No

one on the island knew where she was or that she even existed, except the one man about to break her arms.

When he did not release her, she yelled, “I swear it.”

He loosened his grip and put her back on the ground. She rubbed at her arms, trying to soothe the ache that remained. She glared up at him.

“Are all men as cruel as you?” She asked.

He appeared confused by her question and rightfully so. He of course had no idea that he was the first man she had ever met.

“Tell me who you are,” he demanded.

He showed no remorse for his cruel mistreatment of her now tender arms, and he no doubt would continue his demand for answers until satisfied. As she tried to remember everything her mother taught her of clan life, she began to weave what sounded like a wild tale even to her own ears. She explained that following the untimely death of her parents, her uncle arranged for
her to wed an old man infamous for his cruel treatment of women.

“You and he would likely become fast friends if ever you met,” She scowled at him as she continued to rub her arms.

“So you ran away from your clan to escape marriage. Why did you not go to the council and tell them of your fear. You can refuse a marriage arranged by an uncle. The council would have the final word on the matter if your parents are deceased.”

She was not expecting her story to be so quickly dismissed. She really knew very little about clan custom.

“Well, you see…I…I did go to the council as you said, but they ruled in favor of my uncle. So I had no choice but to run away.” She held her breath, waiting for him to once again prove how isolated and ignorant she was.

“Your council’s decision only proves the worthlessness of MacLean stock.”

Shoney tried to appear offended, but like her mother before her, she cared very little about the merits of either clan or the reasons for their feuding. All she cared about was escaping without any further injury.

“I am sorry for your fate, lass.” His hand gently caressed her cheek, and she was amazed that his touch could be so harsh one moment and so very gentle the next. “’Tis a shame that one so beautiful should be given to a man as loathsome as you described, but there is naught else that can be done. You must return.”

“Return. You wish that I return—to what, pray tell, disgrace.”

She did not expect him to send her back, or rather forth, to unknown lands. She refused to leave her home to keep up with this farce. After all, this land had been tied to her family long before his

had even glimpsed it from their vessels, but none of that mattered at the moment. She need not win the war today, only the battle. All she had to do was get away. Let him believe she would "return" to MacLean territory. Then she could make good her escape and go home. She hung her head as if in defeat.

"I will yield and accept my fate."

"Be brave, lass. If he is as old as you say, he will be dead soon. Mayhap he is even too old to consummate the marriage bed."

She felt her face grow hot with embarrassment. She knew enough about what went on between a man and a woman, although she had never truly understood until today.

"Come on then. Let us walk while I decide what to do with you until I can take you to the border of our lands."

"What," she said unable to hide her surprise, but she continued in a more composed tone. "What I mean to say is that won't be necessary. Surely, you must have responsibilities you are neglecting. I know my way."

She started to head in a southerly direction. She knew not where the MacKinnon lands ended and the MacLean's began, but she did know the MacLeans inhabited the southern part of Mull.

"You will not make the journey alone. You are fortunate to have made it once unspoiled."

"Unspoiled?"

"Yes, unspoiled—not raped or beaten or murdered. You appear to have nothing but the cloths on your back so I can only assume that you encountered some trouble since you have been here. Were you attacked in the woods? Tinkers and miscreants, those banished from both our clans, were recently hiding in the forest."

He was right, of course. If she had run away, she would have packed some belongings, and an attack did seem like the most logical way to explain why she was empty-handed.

"Ah... Indeed," she lied, "I was attacked, and they took my supplies. 'Tis a wonder that I survived."

"And your bow?" he asked.

"They took that as well, the bastards," she sneered.

"Are the MacLean men so useless they need their women to do the hunting," he scoffed.

Once again, he managed to raise her ire, though not in the way he intended. The MacLean men could rot for all she cared, but she clenched her fists against his insinuation that a woman had no business wielding a bow.

"My mother thought it wise for a woman to be able to defend herself or her home if need be. She taught me how to fight," Shoney said as she lifted her head with pride. "Like my mother before me, I

am skilled in all weaponry, including steel. I believe you have a mark on your neck which proves my claim."

Ronan's hand casually brushed the nick. He glanced at his fingers, and then showed Shoney the smearing of blood on their tips.

"You are unlike any lass I have ever met. That much I will give you. But I do not care how skilled you are with a dirk. You are small, even for a woman. You are in no position to defend yourself," he said.

"I have done fine on my own so far," she snapped.

"How can you make such a claim when you stand before me unarmed?"

His arms crossed over his wide chest, and he straightened to his full height as he peered at her down his nose. She craned her neck to meet his gaze. Until then, she had thought that his eyes were plain brown, but the sun revealed flecks of gold and ocher, making them gleam like amber flames. Then her eyes dropped to his full lips and she remembered how soft they felt on her skin.

"I forbid you to go anywhere alone, especially to the wood again," he said.

The blatant arrogance of his words made her forget his kiss. How dare he forbid her from anything. Doubtless, he was used to obedience, but if he thought she was going to be a dulcet lamb, awaiting the command of her shepherd, he was going to be sorely disappointed. She began to voice her indigent protest but then changed her mind. She had to remain calm and not appear vexed. Let him believe her to be compliant so that she could be rid of him. He was dangerous and confusing. His touch was capable of both harm and stirring wildness deep inside of her, both of which she would prefer to avoid.

"I think you are wise, Ronan. Rest assured, I will not seek shelter in the wood again."

She ducked under his arm and advanced out into the moors away from the cliffs. He did not make a grab for her, and so she quickened her pace to a near run in order to put as much ground between them as possible. She expected at any moment to feel the biting clamp of his grip on her arms, but his touch never came, and she never looked back.

After a while when the cliffs and she hoped, Ronan, seemed far behind, she allowed her pace to slow as she finally risked a glimpse around. She was alone. At long last she was free. Releasing a sigh of relief, she resisted the desire to collapse to the ground as her quaking knees revealed just how nervous she had been. She vowed at that moment never to set eyes on Ronan again. A little voice inside her head reminded her she had made the same vow the last time she encountered him, but she decided to ignore it as she turned on her

heel back toward the coast. The cloak and her home by the cliffs waited to conceal her once more, and Ronan was not going to stop her.

Ronan.

She could not wipe his image from her thoughts no matter how hard she tried. Everywhere she looked she saw amber brown eyes. The touch of his full lips pressing into the hollow of her neck lingered. Mother of all, what was wrong with her? She could not have enjoyed looking at him or being touched by him. He was a descendant of King MacAlpin. Then she remembered how his striking features were transformed when she told him she was a MacLean. His lips tightened into a hard sneer and his eyes narrowed, becoming hate-filled slits, and the brute force he applied to her arms demonstrated a cruelty within. Imagine what he would have done if he knew who she really was, if she had stood before him in defiance and revealed her true identity.

She stopped walking and lengthened her back, adopting a strong stance. With a defiant tilt of her chin, she declared to the rolling moors, "I am neither MacLean nor Mackinnon. I am Shoney, daughter of Brethia, great-great-granddaughter of Tharain, descendant of Oengus, King of the Picts."

Shame settled its burdensome weight on her shoulders. She regretted not having the courage to declare her true identity. What would he have done to her? He most likely would have dropped her on the ground in disgust and fled like a coward.

Then she froze. She heard a rhythmic drumming in the distance growing louder and louder with each passing second. She issued forth no sound or breath as she stood watching, waiting for the source of the recurrent pounding to reveal itself. She did not have to wonder long. A large, white stallion crested over a distant hill, and on its back sat a rider with telling ease. His golden brown hair, which shone in the sunlight, and his broad shoulders were all too familiar to her now.

"Damn him."

Shoney launched into a sprint, looking for a place to hide, but the open moors made no offer of tree or bush for which to conceal herself. Not that it mattered—she would need a fortress to escape him now. He spotted her, and she could hear the horse's hooves pummeling the earth. She glimpsed behind as she scampered up a slope. Ronan, hunched low in his saddle, charged toward her with full force.

Did he intend to run her down?

The horse's pounding stride shook the ground beneath her feet and made her heart quake with fear. She looked back and gasped as she stared into the horse's black eyes. She flung her arms in front of her face and screamed as the horse bore down upon her, but instead of

hearing her bones crunch and feeling the agony of her limbs being mangled and ripped askew, she was flying.

His arms wrapped securely around her waist as he lifted her through the air and across his lap.

"You almost killed me, you bastard," she shouted. "Let me go, damn you."

He slowed his horse and chuckled, apparently enjoying her loss of temper.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You, my dear. You are walking in the opposite direction of your kin. Can you not judge the land to distinguish the coast from what lays inshore? I have never known anyone with a worse sense for travel, and you expect to make it beyond Benmore Mountain, which by the way is south of here."

Mother of all, he was like a disease for which she could find no cure. All she wanted to do was go home, feed her empty belly, and count the blessings of her simple life. Instead, she was back in his inescapable grip, atop a giant steed, heading somewhere other than the warmth and safety of her stone hut.

"Where are you taking me? You said before you could not take me to the border just yet."

"You will see," he answered.

"Why are you are unable to take me…er…home now?"

"The pending war, of course," he said, looking down at her like she was thicker than stone, "between the Scots and the Norse."

She knew naught of what he spoke and was too tired to pretend. Let him think she was dimwitted. She did not care.

"'Tis, a shame your clan keeps women so ignorant. These are your lands too—the lands of our fathers and sons but also our mothers and daughters."

Shoney turned her head, looked Ronan straight in the eye and said, "You are right, Ronan. This land is mine."

She faced forward once again and smiled. She told the future chieftain of the Clan MacKinnon the lands they rode over belonged to her. He could not understand the significance of her words, yet she still felt victorious.

They rode back toward the cliffs. Ronan dismounted behind her and took hold of the reins. Then he walked his horse with Shoney still in the saddle down a steep ravine. As they ascended, she glimpsed ocean waves colliding with sheer cliff walls further down the coast and it brought to mind a question.

"How is it possible you were waiting for me on top of the cliffs when I ran from you at the pool? I had the shorter route." Then her eyes widened as she answered her own question. "You didn't…"

“Climb the cliff face,” he said, finishing her statement. “All MacKinnon men climb to strengthen our arms for battle. Our swords are made of iron and steel and are not as slight as you, my dear.”

He was so powerful. If only she had half his strength, she would not hide from the world; instead, she would confront the chieftain himself and challenge him for the rights to her land. She released a sigh. Daydreams only made one’s soul long for the impossible. Her future stretched out before her as fixed and predictable as the cycle of the moon. She would always be feared and loathed, and if ever valued for her wisdom and gifts, it would only be in secret. She must learn to accept her fate.

They reached the shoreline and Ronan pulled himself behind her. With a quick flick of the reins, they were galloping through the waves. The surf splashed against the horse’s legs, spraying the icy water across Shoney and wetting her skirts. The sun was beginning to set, and the wind that whipped her hair about her face and cut through her tunic held the crispness of nightfall, causing her to shiver.

“Hold tight to the mane,” he said as his hands withdrew from her waist.

The absence of his embrace allowed the chill to nip at her back and shoulders. She scooted backward in her seat, seeking the hot comfort of his body.

“Hold on, lass,” he chuckled.

He reached around her waist, spreading his fingers wide across her stomach and pressed her against his rigid chest. She felt his warm breath on her neck as he encircled them both within the thick folds of his plaid. Warmth penetrated her core. She nestled deeper and inhaled the scent of his skin. Everything about him was undeniably male including the rich musky aroma invading her senses. Too long had she been denied the comfort of another’s touch. Her mother used to rock her to sleep as a child. And when Shoney grew too large to cradle, her mother stroked her hair as Shoney rested her head in her lap. She did not need protection. She could take care of herself, but it felt so good not to be alone.

She shook her head, remembering with whom she rode. She could not lose sight of her goal to be rid of him. He was capable of harm and could not be trusted. Besides, if he knew who she really was, he would fling her into the water and ride away. She scowled as she imagined his daft priest burning his plaid because of its proximity to her pagan flesh.

Her resolve restored, she straightened her back to support her own seat rather than resting against his broad chest. Her body protested the loss of warmth with a shiver, but she refused to surrender her strength of purpose. She had to escape, a task that demanded she

remain clear headed, but doubt invaded her thoughts as she considered how she might evade the steel bars he disguised as arms.

Ronan gave a short but firm yank on the reins, bringing his horse to a swift halt. Then he tenderly scratched the steed's ear, earning a whinny in response.

"Look, Bridget."

At first, Shoney did not know to whom he spoke and then remembered her choice of alias. She wondered at that moment what her real name would sound like from his lips. She followed the direction of his gaze. Two jutting cliffs soared above their heads with surfaces so sheer as to deny anyone access, and centered amid the two bluffs, high above the waves was the opening of a cave.

"What a peculiar place," she exclaimed. "I doubt that even you could make that climb."

"Look closer," he whispered, his mouth grazing her earlobe, making her body quiver. Damn his soft lips.

She tried to ignore her body's response to his touch as she studied the wall before her and finally saw a thick rope hanging from the cave opening. Its color, dark with age, blended well into the cliff face.

"It was no small feat to secure the rope initially, but it is strong and will bring us safely inside."

"You intend to stick me in that cave," she snapped, his soft lips forgotten, "to imprison me?"

"Do not think of it as a prison, lass. 'Tis merely a safe refuge," He replied.

"But I haven't the strength to climb up or to descend back down. I will be trapped."

"I know. You will be safe from every trouble, including that which you might make yourself." His smug smile made her want to scream.

"Do not think for a moment that I will go willing, you conceited son of a...."

He placed his hand over her mouth. "You will kindly stop there and not insult my mother or my father." He pulled his hand away as he stared at her. "Another tantrum? And here I thought *I* had a problem controlling my temper." His voice softened, "You are a strange girl, Bridget. I offer you protection from harm and respite from your unpleasant, albeit forthcoming, nuptials. I expected gratitude not arguments."

He had every reason to be confused by her behavior. If wedded misery loomed in her immediate future, then mayhap she would embrace his plan, but an unwanted betrothal was not one of her problems. She ached for home, and the prospect of the cave destroyed all hope of return. He sought to provide her a sanctuary, but he unknowingly threatened her with a prison that required no bars or

doors—the drop to certain death was lock and key.

How could she explain this to him without revealing her secret? Then fear engulfed her thoughts. The cave would be as dark as a grave. She shivered as she imagined the darkness closing in around her, choking the very breath from her body. She would not live to see the dawn. Either her heart would seize, terror claiming her life, or she would go insane and throw herself from the black mouth of the cave to the murky waters below. Even now, her body trembled as she imagined the worst.

"You are shaking, Bridget. No more protests. I must get you out of the cold," Ronan said as he dismounted. Then he began to reach for her, but she kicked him away.

"Did you not hear me?" she shouted. "I am not an animal for you to trap. And if you are concerned about my health, 'tis colder in that dank place than anywhere else on the island."

He ignored her, but she kept on fighting. Her swinging fists connected with his powerful physique, likely afflicting more pain to her knuckles than to his unyielding hardness, but she did not care. She refused to surrender even as he placed his hands at her waist and lifted her from the stallion's back.

"You will be quite comfortable. I assure you," he said.

He pulled her through the briskly moving seas. The waves lapped at her thighs before colliding with the unforgiving cliff wall. She finally conceded she was no match against his brawn. Instead, she tried to think of another reason why they should not ascend the rope.

"What about the horse?" she gasped, breathless from her struggles.

"The tide will not come in for some time. The horse is quite safe." He replied.

He began to wrap the top folds of his plaid around her, securing her body to his. She was trapped and unable to fight. Not that it would have made a difference. At any moment, he would climb the sheer wall to the great height above where she would be swallowed by a dark hole in the rock. Terror gripped her mind, poisoning her heart and causing a layer of perspiration to blanket her brow despite the chill in the air. Once again, her body betrayed her as tremors surged down her limbs and a knot gathered in her throat.

"No, Ronan," she whispered as wet tears filled her eyes. "Please, do not put me in there." Shame settled over her as the pleading tones left her lips, but there was naught else to be done. She could not face the darkness.

"Hush, lass," he crooned as his arms encircled her. "Are you so afraid of the height?"

"No," she cried.

"'Tis a very deep cave. You will not fall, if that is what worries

you."

"That is not why I am afraid."

"Then why?" he asked.

"'Tis the dark," she whispered. Her head hung heavy with disgrace.

She felt the pressure of his finger under her chin as he forced her to meet his gaze. She expected him to scorn her, but instead his eyes glowed with amber warmth.

"You are a rare lass," he breathed, "so strong and yet so vulnerable."

He stroked her cheek, and she felt herself succumb to the gentle caress. "You will find yourself quite at home up there, Bridget. You must trust me."

"But, I have no reason to trust you."

He said nothing in reply. A slow, sensual smile pulled at one side of his lips, and she could not help but admire his easy confidence. She made no further protest as he finished tying the folds of his plaid. Then grasping the rope firmly in his hands, he proceeded to scale the daunting precipice.

Shoney turned away at last and looked out to sea. The water reflected the dusky shades of sunset. Pinks and oranges imbued each wave's approach, but the colors were cut away by the shadow of the massive cliff. Each wave that struck the rock face was as grey and stark as the stone itself.

"You must hurry. Dusk is upon us," she said.

"I am sorry if my pace displeases you," he chuckled as he crossed one hand over the other, pulling them ever higher, "but if you care to muscle the two of us up this rope, then by all means, you may take over."

Mother of all, he was maddening.

"I have a different purpose for this rope in mind," she began. "It involves a strong branch and you dangling beneath."

"Hmmm, it would seem that my warrior has vanquished the vulnerable maid. I think I prefer when you are frightened."

Shoney intended to give him a tongue lashing meant to wipe the smug smile off his face for good, but one of his hands released the rope and covered her mouth. He lowered his head, and she felt his warm breath on her ear. Her mind spiraled back to the moment when his kiss first grazed her neck as her wet, naked body pressed against his hard, muscled physique. She shivered but this time not from the cold or fear of the dark.

"Be silent for once woman," he whispered, "or the light will be gone, and I will be forced to sleep in the cave with you."

Shoney's eyes opened wide, and she pressed her lips together. His eyes mocked her, daring her to speak, but she kept her silence.

Ronan continued to climb the rope with seemingly little effort, occasionally catching a foothold in the wall. She dare not look down; instead she clung to his frame and focused on the feel of his back muscles shifting beneath her hands and the smell of his skin. Finally, they reached the mouth of the cave. As he pulled their bodies inside, he twisted to avoid pinning her beneath him.

Her worst nightmare realized, she was frozen, drenched, and famished, cowering at the entrance of a perilous cave, surrounded by darkness. Which would truly be the worst fate—being left alone to freeze or starve to death in a desolate cave or confessing her true identity and putting her fate in the hands of the MacKinnons?

He walked deep inside the cave into the dark unknown, and she wondered with fear if he expected her to follow. She started to ask what he was doing but then remembered his threat if she were to speak again and decided to remain silent.

She sighed with relief when he emerged from the deep and knelt at the edge of the cave entrance. He began making a familiar tapping noise, and just moments later, there was a steady fire building. She did not try to conceal her joy as the small fire grew, illuminating the cave. The firelight revealed a deep, dry space, which was twice the length of her home and about half its width. In the back, she could just make out a stack of peat for fuel. She stood up and began to walk about.

"There is plenty of fuel to keep this fire going for days." His voice was soft as he took her hand and showed her the amenities the cave offered.

"There is a pallet for sleeping and some plaids to keep you warm. You will of course have to wear the MacKinnon colors." He smiled at her. She sensed he was proud of the cave's secret comfort.

"You will also find dried meat and ale," he said, pointing to a plain wooden chest. She had to admit that for a cave it was rather cozy.

"'Tis wonderful, Ronan, but why is this all here?" she asked.

He removed his sword and stood it against the wall. "I first started coming here as a lad when my older brother, Nachlan, died. I was eleven, and I came here thinking I could escape the sadness."

Shoney stared at the large and powerful man before her and could not believe that he was ever so small.

"I am sorry, Ronan."

"It was long ago, Bridget. I keep this place well supplied for when I need a little peace and quiet. Solitude is rarely granted a chieftain's son."

Ronan's confession had Shoney's mind reeling. Their lives were so different. His life was a tapestry of friends and family, custom and duty, which sometimes drove him to this place of isolation; whereas,

destiny demanded she walk through life alone. How often had she prayed for the Mother of all to bring her solace from loneliness? It never occurred to her that someone else might seek it out.

She sat beside the fire, warming her hands above the flame. “You have my thanks, Ronan. I’m sure I will be very comfortable here.”

“I am glad you are pleased, but with comfort in mind, Bridget, you must change out of your wet tunic or else catch your death.”

He handed her one of the dry plaids before he turned away. For a moment, Shoney was confused. Surely he did not intend for her to wear a plaid folded as he did with just a sash across her chest. As she contemplated how best to dress herself, her teeth began to chatter from the cold. She shrugged off her drenched cloak and yanked her tunic and kirtle over her head. Then she set about wrapping herself in one of the large tartan blankets. In the end, she swept it around her shoulders, holding it in place with her hands.

“You may turn. I am decent…barely,” she muttered under her breath.

Ronan started to laugh the moment he turned around. “You truly are the most unusual lass I have ever known.” He closed the distance between them and reached for the plaid, but she ducked under his arm to avoid his touch.

“You have naught to fear, lass. My intention is to assist you into your clothing not to remove it, although you hide nothing that I have not already had the pleasure of viewing.”

Mortified by his blunt reminder, her embarrassment soon gave way to rage. She lashed out, slapping the smile from his face and in the process losing her grip on the tartan all together. She stood before him as naked as the day she came into the world. Though, her hands rushed to cover the more intimate areas of her body, she
stood straight and proud, refusing to acknowledge her disgrace.

She expected him to taunt her or to strike her in return, but instead he stared with wide, somber eyes. She followed his gaze to her arms. Shoney gasped as she understood why he was transfixed. Raising a hesitant hand, he grazed the tips of his fingers across one of the bruises now lining her arms. They were a reminder of the crushing strength he used against her earlier that day, following her claim to be a MacLean.

He crouched low and scooped up her plaid. Saying nothing, he walked behind her and with adept hands he wrapped the plaid around her form. Using her own belt, he secured half the fabric at her waist. Then facing her, he crisscrossed the remainder over her chest and around her shoulders then back around her chest again and secured the folds with a pin he produced from his sporran.

He still did not speak but took her hands in his. She felt for a

moment like a child. Her small hands seemed to disappear in his mighty grasp. He knelt in front of her.

"Forgive me, Bridget. I have a wicked temper, but I did not think I was capable of such cruelty." He released a half-hearted chuckle that surprised her. "You see, I am naught but a bad joke. Earlier, I congratulated myself for the restraint I have shown since we set out to come here. There have been several occasions when I might have lost my temper, but you somehow make me feel…peaceful, even with your tantrums and foul language." His eyes brighten from brown to amber, and she realized they revealed the intensity of his emotions.

"Look at what I have done to you." His hands gestured to her arms.

Shoney sensed his sincerity and was moved by his words, but as Ronan continued, her sympathy turned to fury.

"You are the weaker sex. 'Tis my duty to protect not to harm."

"What," she cried as she shoved him with all her might, the force knocking him back on the hard rock floor.

"You are saying all of this only because I am a woman?" she shouted, shaking her fist in his face. "A woman can be a threat as well as a man. A woman can fight with steel and fist." She stared down at him, breathing hard. Then she offered him her hand. "You thought me a threat to your clan and so you acted." He reached out and accepted her help to stand. "I do not want your treatment of me to be dictated by my sex but rather by my merit," she said.

He stared at her for some time. Shoney could not tell what he was thinking. Then his full lips curved into his sideways grin, and she suddenly felt breathless and unsure of herself. With both hands, he cupped her face and tilted her head back. She could feel the warmth of his breath and smell his rich, masculine scent.

"As I said before, you are the most unusual lass I have ever known." Then he pressed a kiss to her brow, but as his lips touched her skin a white light erupted in her mind's eye, and she was lost to a vision.

There was a man riding hard over the moors. His black curls stuck to his face as sweat dripped from his brow. To his rear were five riders giving chase and gaining on him. He disappeared into a thick haze and one by one the riders followed. Thunder clamored with deafening force as the black-haired rider pushed on unseeing through the dense fog. Then five gleaming blades cut through the mist like veins of lightening, piercing his body. He cried out and fell, vanishing into the thick haze. As the fog lifted, his bloodied body crumbled at the foot of the Cillchriosd Standing Stone, and in the distance fled five riders with a horse in tow. The man opened his eyes. They were as blue and bright as the summer sky, and from his lips came forth a simple plea, "Shoney," he cried.

Shoney's eyes snapped open as she inhaled sharply.

"Bridget, what happened? Are you hurt?" Ronan's

voice tugged at her senses, releasing Shoney from her trance.

She was fine, but somewhere out there was a man with black hair and startling blue eyes who was hurt and in desperate need of aid.

"I will be alright, Ronan, but I'm afraid I do feel a bit faint, and I am famished."

He looked doubtful. "Why did you not answer when I called your name?" His hand went to her brow. "You do not feel feverish."

"I am hungry and tired. Please, I really must rest."

"Let me roll out your pallet, and you can lie down while I prepare the meat and ale."

Shoney appeared to rest while Ronan retrieved their nourishment, but in truth her mind was racing. Often her visions were symbolic, requiring interpretation, but tonight's vision conveyed a clear message. The man with the blue eyes needed a healer, but trapped in the belly of a stone beast above the rising ocean tides, her skills were useless. Ronan was not going to let her leave without explanation. She simply had no choice but to try to push the man from her thoughts.

"Here, let me help you sit up," he said as he slid his broad hand underneath her back and lifted her upward to a seated position.

His hand covered a large expanse of her back, demonstrating once again his size and strength. He gave her the food and drink, which she gratefully accepted and gulped down.

"Thank you," she said. "This is a welcomed surprise."

"I have never brought anyone up here before. You are a welcomed surprise," he smiled.

Shoney felt herself blush. As she reached for more meat, she brushed against his plaid. "Ronan, you are still wet. You ought to change as well."

Shoney turned her head toward the cave wall. She waited for him to make a quip about having already seen him naked, but he refrained, which she was glad for—she had blushed enough for one night.

"I am decent," he said.

She looked up at him and admired his tall form. His plaid slashed across his broad chest and over one of his powerful shoulders. The brawn of his torso slimmed out at his waist where his skirt began. The material fell in folds just at his knees, revealing muscular calves. The light provided by the fire revealed numerous scars that twisted his skin. They were reminders of battles fought alongside and on behalf of his kinsmen, men and women who wore the same plaid that she wore now.

The plaid.

The man with blue eyes wore the muted green and orange of the MacKinnon plaid. The man in her vision belonged to Ronan's clan.

Perhaps he was even a close friend or relation. Guilt swept through her, twisting her stomach into tight knots. She now regretted having eaten so quickly. She could not tell Ronan that his clansmen lie beaten and likely dying on the moors. He would ask how she came by the information, and what explanation could she give? *I can see beyond what my eyes allow, but I am not a witch*. His prejudice would blind him, and he would hate her. The idea of Ronan hating her unsettled her stomach even further. She had to act fast or lose her supper.

She had only one option—to lie. But she was barely staying afloat in the sea of fabrications she spewed earlier. This new deception demanded simplicity, or else it would lead to questions that might pull her under.

A harmless lie came to her, and although weak, it seemed uncontrived. Shoney's hand flew to her neck.

"My pendant is gone." She scurried off her pallet and lifted it to look beneath.

"Please, Ronan, 'tis dear to me. Help me look," she implored as she sifted through their wet clothes, shaking them as if hoping to uncover her treasure.

"Bridget, I do not remember ever seeing a token around your neck."

Damn him.

"I believe 'tis something I would have noticed," he said.

Mother of all, rot the black-haired man, but there was no turning back now.

"My father and mother fashioned a pendant for me from small white shells. 'Tis all I have by which to remember them. I cannot go on without it." She pinched herself to produce a few tears for good measure.

He grasped her shoulders. "Hush, Bridget. You must calm down. Your necklace is not here, of this I am certain. Nor did you have it at the pool when you ran from me. Together we will search for it in the morning."

"No, it cannot wait until morning," she cried. "Someone might find it first. The moon will be at its fullest tonight to light our way. It must be tonight."

"This is madness, Bridget."

"I will go without you, even if I risk death sliding down the rope." She grabbed his hands. "I beseech you."

Ronan stared at her. She could not guess at his thoughts. Then he released a slow breath and agreed to her request.

"I will go, but I do so alone, Bridget."

She brought his hands to her lips and kissed his rough skin. "Thank you, Ronan. What you do now is truly life or death. Last night I slept beneath a standing stone not more than a league from the pool."

“I know the place. We call it the Cillchriosd Stone,”

“Then go and be swift.”

He donned his sword and made for the entrance. “I still say this is madness, Bridget, but I know what it is to lose family. In honor of your parents and my brother, I do this.”

Then he grabbed hold of the rope and disappeared over the edge. Shoney peered down and held her breath as she watched him descend into the shadows and waves. She longed to call after him, already regretting his absence, but instead she prayed to the Mother of all that he find his kinsman before it was too late.

CHapter 4

The pale face inside the full moon looked down on Ronan with what he saw as a mocking grin. It was nightfall and he rode over the purple moors on a baffling errand for an equally baffling lass. He had never felt absurd before, but it appeared as though there was a first for everything. He should be at home with a full belly and a warm fire, yet he still could not turn from his quest. Instead, he urged his mount to ride even faster toward the Cillchriosd Stone. He did not understand what had come over him. He was not given to romantic whimsies like Aidan, and he usually did not have patience for the fairer sex. Nevertheless, shirking all responsibility and no doubt causing his father boundless vexation, he wanted nothing more than to be the man to make Bridget smile—so here he was.

He imagined her wrapped in the MacKinnon colors, likely asleep on his pallet with her long black lashes fanned out against her fair skin. Her golden hair lit by the flames of the fire he built for her, and her full lips slightly parted, waiting to be consumed by his kiss.

Damn her pendant. He wanted nothing more than to turn his horse around, ride back to the cliffs, and have his fill of her. He groaned aloud as he recalled their meeting that morning in the pool. He could still feel her slick, wet body pressed against his own. He longed to savor every curve. He wondered if he could ignite her passion as easily as he did her anger. Sweet Jesus, he had never wanted another woman as he did Bridget, Bridget MacLean. He groaned aloud as he again remembered her surname, a fact that continued to conveniently slip his mind.

His father would be furious if he knew Ronan gave shelter to a MacLean runaway. Worse yet, if he learned of Ronan's burgeoning desire, his father's rage would be heard all the way to Skye and rightly so. Surely, the consequence of his affection might be war, especially if she was betrothed to another. Beyond the odd cattle raid or small feud, it had been some years since the two clans had fought on the battlefield, and given the pending war with the Norse, how could he further add to the insecurities facing his clan by picking a fight with their adversaries to the south.

Violet swells of moonlit earth stretched out before him like ocean waves at twilight frozen in time. The moon was large and hung low in the sky, and as Bridget predicted, it shone brightly, illuminating his path. He could even make out the standing stone in the distance. He spurred his horse forward. He felt consumed by the urgency to find Bridget's treasure. He wanted to make her happy. He wanted to make

her his.

Jesus above, what was wrong with him?

He was acting like a love-sick maid, and it had to stop. His behavior over the past weeks had been disgraceful. He neglected his duties, consequently disrespecting his family, his position, and his clan. He could not ignore reality or pretend as though things were different—she was a MacLean, comely perhaps, but still a MacLean.

With gritted teeth, he resolved to honor his duty. He would find her pendant but would not return it to her tonight. Ronan knew that were he to enter the cave again before dawn, he would not be able to deny the heat of his desire. Images of her long, flowing hair cascading down her slender back and resting against the swell of her buttocks came unbidden to his mind. He shook the image from his head. He could never see her again. It was that simple. In the morning, he would send two of his trusted warriors to retrieve her and bring her to the outskirts of MacLean territory. It was a solution that prioritized his family and his responsibilities. And yet, regret and longing gnawed at his belly, spreading throughout his body like bracken over the hills.

He would never see Bridget again. He closed his eyes and conjured her face so that he might savor her loveliness one last time. But his musings were interrupted as his horse brayed loudly and ground its hooves deep into the earth, coming to an immediate halt. Ronan fell forward and off to the side, the muscles in his legs strained to keep him atop his mount. He leapt to the ground, grabbed the horse's bit and stared the beast in the eye.

"What the hell happened?" he snarled.

The horse whinnied and tossed its head. Ronan released its bit and rubbed a soothing hand through its mane.

"Hush, boy. What's the matter with you? You nearly launched me to my death." Ronan looked around and saw that the Cillchriosd Stone was just up ahead. Then his gaze was pulled toward a dark heap on the ground not twenty strides away. Ronan narrowed his eyes and saw the MacKinnon plaid and telling black curls.

"Aidan," Ronan cried as he hurried to kneel at his friend's side. Aidan lay on his stomach with one knee bent as if trying to crawl forward.

"Aidan," Ronan rolled his friend's limp body over and saw that he was breathing.

"Thank you Jesus and Mary, you're alive."

No thanks to him.

If his horse had not stopped, then Aidan would have been crushed beneath the animal's stride. Bridget had preoccupied his thoughts, proving once again the destructive nature his desire. Daydreaming was not a privilege afforded the future laird of the MacKinnon.

“Aidan can you hear me?”

When Aidan did not respond, Ronan began to check the extent of his wounds. He had not suffered any fatal blows. There were no punctures from blades, but he had been thrashed nigh to death. One eye was swollen shut. His face was smeared with blood and dirt, and bruises were forming from his skull to his legs.

“Who did this Aidan? Wake up so I can find the bastards and beat the life out of them.” Ronan gently shook his friend. “Aidan, wake up. You must wake up.” Aidan stirred and slowly opened his one eye. He lifted his head but winced and fell back.

“Don’t worry, Aidan. You’ve been flattened alright, but you will live.”

“I thought I was in heaven,” Aidan whispered through cracked, dry lips. “There was an angel with golden hair and dark eyes smiling at me.”

“You aren’t in Heaven, Aidan. You are right here on Mull,” Ronan said.

“I know I can’t be in Heaven. You would never get past the gate,” Aidan chuckled. “Oh damn that hurt. No more jokes—that felt like a hot poker jabbing my side.”

“You have some broken ribs,” Ronan said.

“Those bastards were certainly thorough.”

“Who did this, Aidan?”

Aidan tried again to raise his head but fell back. “To hell with sitting up. Just leave me, Ronan. Let me stay here and wait for the angel to come back. She was sweet to look upon. I’m sorry friend, but I would rather die in her arms than yours.”

“You aren’t going to die,” Ronan said dryly.

“If it meant seeing her face again, then I would wish to die.” His voice trailed off into a whisper Ronan strained to hear. “I’d wrap myself in her long golden hair and drown in her stormy eyes. Eyes like gray stone, but they were warm, and they beckoned me.”

Aidan’s whispers describing his angel trailed off as he fell asleep. Golden hair and gray eyes made Ronan once again think of Bridget. If one could imagine immaculate beauty sent from Heaven, who else might this beauty look like but Bridget. Again he pictured her safe and warm in his cave. Ronan shook his head. He had to put her out of his thoughts for good. Right now he had only two concerns, getting Aidan home and punishing those who hurt him. But Aidan never confirmed who was to blame. He knew it was likely the MacLeans. Still, with tinkers about, he had to be sure.

“Aidan,” Ronan said as he gently shook his friend. “Aidan, who did this to you?”

“MacLeans,” Aidan whispered, “five of them.”

CHapter 5

Ronan lifted Aidan astride his horse. His friend fumbled with the horse's mane in an attempt to secure his seat. Observing his struggle, Ronan wrapped the extra folds of Aidan's plaid around the horse's neck to anchor him down.

His friend's safety assured, Ronan mounted behind him and turned his horse toward Gribun. Aidan's broken ribs set the pace, but he longed to race home. A creeping sense of foreboding washed over him. The source likely caused by Aidan's injuries weighing on his mind, but with every gait that brought him closer to the village, the gnawing suspicion of greater woe intensified. He suspected Aidan was not the only MacKinnon to suffer misfortune that night.

The luminous moon shone a glow over the outskirts of the village. At first glance, all seemed normal, but then he caught the scent of scorched hay and timber on the breeze, and as he drew closer, he could hear the faint din of upheaval.

"Sorry, Aidan."

Ronan tightened his hold on his friend and drove his heels into the horse's flanks. The beast spurred forward, charging toward the village at a faster pace than Ronan demanded as if he too felt the prick of something ominous in the air.

He flew by barren hut and pathway. Not a soul did he pass. The village, which was usually bustling with life, was silent and cast in darkness. He searched for even one hearth fire, but only the stars and moon lit his way. The turmoil was coming from the courtyard of Dun Ara Castle beyond the cluster of usually welcoming homes. He hastened through the open gates of the courtyard and slid from his horse with Aidan in his arms. Silence fell on the crowd when they saw their fallen brother.

Ronan's father hurried to his side. "Does he live?" the MacKinnon asked.

"Aye, father, he lives, but not because they didn't try their worst."

The MacKinnon inspected Aidan's wounds. "No doubt he'll live," and in a louder voice he continued, "and still be the prettiest maid in the village."

"At death's door and you take a swipe at my pretty face. You're jealous, the lot of you." Aidan smiled but winced from the effort.

"Did the last stretch of the ride rouse you from your beauty sleep?" Ronan asked.

"What were you trying to do? Finish the job?" Aidan groaned.

The MacKinnon motioned to a woman looking on with wide,

worried eyes, “Morna, come now and nurse your son.” Then he turned to a large warrior, “Guthrie, help him and make sure Morna has everything she needs.” Aidan winced as he stood with Guthrie’s aid, and as they slowly progressed toward Aidan’s hut, the MacKinnon’s attention turned back to Ronan.

“’Tis safe to assume the bastard MacLean is responsible?”

“Aye, Father. It was a small band of five warriors. Aidan patrolled the eastern fields tonight. They must have attacked during his watch, because I found him near the Cillchriosd Stone.”

“Twice as many attacked the cottars from the same direction. So the bastards did away with the watch. Then they took their fill.” The MacKinnon raked his hand through his hair showing his agitation.

“What damage, father?” Ronan asked.

“No soul was harmed, except Aidan of course, but they torched several fields and emptied one store.”

“’Tis, folly,” Ronan exclaimed. “The MacLean knows we’ve twice the warriors and stores. Why such a brazen raid?”

“Aye,” the MacKinnon replied, “The attack demands a response. We cannot turn a blind eye as we do with their usual tinkering. The MacLean must realize this.”

“Unless he is betting we won’t retaliate because of the battle that awaits us with the Norse,” Ronan said.

Warriors and council members alike began to gather around their laird. Dugald, the largest of the warriors, spoke up.

“Did you see what they did to fair Aidan?” He withdrew his sword. “At your word, MacKinnon, I will go and teach the MacLean a lesson and be back and ready to fight the Norse by dawn.”

Eager to avenge their brother, the warriors withdrew their swords and called out in support of Dugald’s proposal, creating a din loud enough to be heard on the open moors.

“Hold, lads. Hold.”

Ronan turned to look at the owner of the soft voice, trying to penetrate the rambunctious calls of the men. His faced was creased with age and his plaid hung loosely over frail shoulders.

Ronan raised his hands and shouted, “Silence. Argyle wishes to speak.” A hush fell over the men as they turned expectant eyes toward the old man.

“We are on the brink of war with the Norse not only as men of the MacKinnon but of the Hebrides and as Scotsmen. Our good laird promised King Alexander our swords in battle.” Ronan watched as his clansmen nodded their heads in agreement.

“We must stay our course, Lads.” Argyle finished.

“Argyle is right,” The MacKinnon said. “We cannot allow the shite to the south to distract us from our responsibility. A responsibility, so

tells the most recent messenger from the king, the coward MacLean refuses to accept. We will not waste time and resources against their cowardice."

Dugald raised his sword to speak once more. "We understand the wisdom of the Mackinnon's words, but, good Laird, we must do something. The MacLean cannot duck blame after such a blatant attack."

"Aye, Dugald, you are right, and we shall retaliate, but in a manner the MacLean will not expect," the MacKinnon replied.

"They're all as dense as fence posts. They haven't the wits to expect the morning sun to rise," Guthrie said as he joined the group, and like the rest of the clansmen, Ronan enjoyed a good laugh as the MacLean's expense.

"Ronan, my lad."

"Aye, father."

"What say you in all this?"

"I propose a mission of stealth," he replied.

"Aye, my thinking as well." The MacKinnon faced Ronan and rested his hand on his son's shoulder. "What is your plan?"

Ronan raised his voice so that every council member and warrior could hear. "We will track the thieves at a distance, allowing them to gain some ground. They will think they've won an easy victory and conceit will guide their actions, ensuring imprudence."

"And by imprudence you mean pissed drunk don't you," shouted Dugald. When the laughter died down Ronan continued.

"'Tis likely they woke up pissed, Dugald. What else would have made them act so foolhardy? Once they make camp, we move in. We silence the watch and take back our stores. They wake up empty-handed and disgraced."

A short while later, Ronan raced once again across the moors, only this time on the trail of the MacLeans. He was joined by Dugald and Guthrie. He chose Dugald for his large, intimidating frame and his ability to close in on the enemy undetected. Guthrie wielded the swiftest blade among the warriors, faster even than Ronan. Both were essential in any situation where the numbers favored the enemy.

The band of raiders cut a careless trail over the moors, carved by the pounding of their horse's hooves. On a cloudy night, a child could have followed the MacLean's tracks. With the bright moon at its fullest, it was effortless.

"The tracks are growing fresher," Dugald said. "We are gaining ground fast."

Ronan nodded and slowed his pace, signally for the other men to do the same. "Let's make sure we give them plenty of time to

break into the whiskey they lifted from our stores."

Dugald rode beside him, and they discussed the plan of attack in more detail. When the matters of timing and whether to kill or maim were settled, Dugald shifted the conversation to Aidan. "An angel must have guided you."

Ronan inhaled sharply.

Bridget.

Amid the chaos and planning, he forgot about Bridget—something he had tried to do for a fortnight. Apparently, to set his mind free of her required an attack on his village, the theft of essential stores, and the pummeling of his best friend. He could not afford to be so consumed by a woman.

Owing to Ronan's abrupt intake of breath, Dugald signaled an alarm to Guthrie and both reached behind their backs, swiftly drawing their swords.

"Sheath your blades, lads. There's naught amiss. I simply remembered something requiring my care, but the matter will have to wait." Ronan tried to forget Bridget again, but having renewed her place in his thoughts, she laid claim to all of him. He longed to abandon his kinsmen, forget the mission, and race back to the cave where she was waiting.

"Where did you say you found him?" Dugald's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Who?" Ronan asked.

"Aidan. I asked you where you found Aidan. Are you alright?" Dugald said, his expression bewildered.

Distracted was not something to which Ronan was accustomed, and apparently, he was not the only one to notice. He needed to pull himself together.

"I rode west to find something of value last seen near the Cillchriosd Stone. It was there that I happened upon Aidan."

"A very lucky coincidence for Aidan," Dugald said.

Ronan grunted in agreement, but then his eyes narrowed. His chance discovery of Aidan's beaten and unconscious body at the very place to which Bridget urged him went beyond auspicious. Bridget led Ronan to Aidan's side. Was it serendipity? Or had she known his kinsman's fate? He felt certain it was the latter.

'Tis a matter of life or death, she said before he left. But if the lost pendant was a plot to save Aidan, why not speak of his need in the first place?

He shook his head. How could she have known about Aidan's attack when she had never left his side? Unless she was in league with her fellow clansmen, but then why would she reveal Aidan's location, ultimately saving his life? What's more, if she was acting on behalf of

her clan, what did they hope to gain by putting Bridget in his path? Did they hope he would find her irresistible, using the defiling of a MacLean maiden as a legitimate way to start a war? Every new thought led to a new question, but the answers he sought were less than a league away. He needed to be patient for just a little while longer. The brigands they tracked would be able to shed some light on the uncertainties surrounding Bridget even if they needed a little persuasion.

"God's blood," Ronan swore.

"What now?" Dugald asked.

"'Tis nothing," he replied. "Only, I am tired of waiting."

"That makes two of us," Guthrie grinned.

Ronan's smile concealed his true frustration, which had forced the oath from his lips in the first place. He could not question the MacLeans without putting Bridget at risk, and he refused to jeopardize her safety regardless of her crimes. Only one thing was certain—there was never a lost necklace. Bridget had lied, but he would find no answers tonight. He would have to bide his time until he could return to the cave.

He smirked, thinking of her high above the surface of the tossing seas, his mind eased by another certainty—Bridget wasn't going anywhere. At that moment, she was likely asleep on his pallet. Her slim waist and the flare of her hips outlined beneath his plaid. He closed his eyes as her slender but ripe figure came to mind. He imagined her parted lips, and his touch enticing her breaths to quicken as she issued forth a plea for more.

He shook his head, trying desperately to remove the tantalizing images of her sleek curves from his mind. He needed to steel himself against her allure to ensure he did not place his physical hunger for her above his need for answers—a challenge that would demand all of his strength.

Chapter 6

Shoney paced up and down the length of the cave. Three nights past since Ronan left, and as the sun dipped low in the sky, signaling the arrival of darkness, she resolved to spend another night trapped in her gateless prison alone.

Why had he not returned?

The Cillchriosd Stone was only an hour's ride from the cave. What if Ronan had been attacked as well? What if he lay bleeding beside his friend who was sure to be dead by now? Her eyes opened wide with fear. If he was dead, she would be trapped inside the cave until death released her. The only alternative, to scramble down the rope, would likely end with her lifeless body being pushed by waves against the cliff face again and again until the tides swept her out to sea.

She shook her head. She must not surrender her mind to false imaginings. Ronan would return, and as soon as her feet touched firm earth, she'd escape from her self-proclaimed guardian and finally go home.

She stood at the opening of the cave and watched the sun set behind the water. Sundown brought her only source of pleasure over the past four days. The shafts of light from the muted orb reached across the water, swaying and rippling. It was the oldest and most sacred dance. The sky blazed gold and dusky pink, lighting everything it touched with flames of color. The skin on her arms glowed as though she were a gilded statue. Everything illuminated by the sun's blush was to her at that moment connected as if one being.

She thanked the Mother of all for conceiving such splendor, and she whispered a prayer for her dear mother. Dusk faded into twilight. She glanced down to the distant waters below, and in the waning light, she could just trace the full length of the rope with her eyes.

As the shadows crept forth to enclose the cave in darkness, her mind returned again to the last time she saw Ronan. She glimpsed the flexing and shifting of the thick muscles in his arms, shoulders, and back as he descended into the encroaching fog. Mist began to entwine its wispy fingers around his body, obscuring his features, yet his stare penetrated the shadows, holding her gaze. She blushed, thinking of his piercing eyes burning a pathway through the mysteries of her person to the place of private within that only she knew. She had felt spellbound, unwittingly inviting in the enemy to warm and gain comfort beside her soul's own fire.

Her vulnerability to his presence was too acute to deny and too sweet to forget, but she had to try. She pondered too long on those

last fleeting moments when she should have been devising a way to escape. Despite knowing better, she found herself returning to the near kiss they almost shared…to the warmth radiating from his torso as he enfolded her in his plaid while riding through the chilly surf…to the moment when his hard, slick body pressed against her naked skin in the pool where he forged a trail of searing kisses across her throat and chest.

Mother of all, she needed to clear her head. But how could she in this prison? Her confinement was clearly to blame for the singular direction of her thoughts. Memories of Ronan distracted her from facing the critical possibility that her days were numbered.

She turned back into the cave, time to make the fire before the last light faded. Already the stack of peat at the rear hid in the shadows. She struck the flint stones until sparks leapt onto the dried moss. The wiry grasses turned orange with heat as they crackled into flame. Soon she coaxed a small fire into a warm blaze, which whisked away the chill brought on by the cool evening, reminding her of summer's warmth and abundance. She envisioned the verdant green of the moors kissed with patches of heather, lavender, and plump thistle; countless herbs to gather and dry; and fresh salves to mix. Summertime would soon settle on Mull, but to enjoy all of its lushness, first she had to escape. She expelled a long breath and began once again to pace the length of the cave. Back and forth she treaded. Soon the hard stone would wear beneath her feet, leaving a mark to prove she'd been there even when her bones had turned to dust.

Despite how she tried, she could find no method of escape, no safe method anyway. She did not have the strength to descend the full length of rope. This required the arms of a practiced warrior. But being undisciplined, she lacked a true warrior's strength. She needed Ronan's heavily muscled chest and shoulders to make the climb. He bore her weight up the cliff side with the ease of the wind carrying the meadowsweet seed. She closed her eyes and allowed her mind to take her back to that moment. Her head rested on his chest. She curled her fingers into the golden hairs that clung wetly to every swell of muscle. She inhaled his scent. It was like nothing she ever smelled before—warm, spicy, and intoxicating. Despite her fear, she longed to bury her face in the crook of his neck and unabashedly inhale over and over again.

Ronan was the first and only man she had ever seen face to face. She always wondered what a man really looked like but never had she conceived fine features and a sensual sideways smile, nor could she have imagined her own intense response to maleness. Were all men like Ronan? She stopped mid tread and released a frustrated cry. Mother of all, why did he torment her mind?

He bewitched her, casting a spell that stole her thoughts, her breath, even her will. She had inhaled his scent and its fingers gripped her senses, taking hold of her mind and the deep pit of her stomach. Her entire being was under assault, and they called her *witch*. She needed to steel herself against the onslaught of his presence so that when he returned she could fight the magic, *if* he returned.

A shiver coursed down her spine as she again considered the prospect of abandonment, suspended above rocks and waves, but then a new terror shook her, leaving a frustrating sadness in its wake. What if she never saw Ronan again?

Clearly, her entombing was chipping away at her sanity. He was arrogant, pushy, and without doubt dangerous. She could not wait to be rid of him and return to her peaceful life alone.

Alone.

The word echoed in her mind. That was it. She detested solitude so much even Ronan's company seemed favorable. Her lonely existence was punishment for a crime she did not commit. She closed her eyes and steadied her breathing. She was descended from warriors. She knew how to wield a sword and hit her target with an arrow. She refused to discount her own strength.

Walking to the entrance of the cave, she stared down into the abyss below. She closed her eyes and breathed in the salty air. The wind picked up, causing the tangled tendrils of her hair to lick her face and catch in the breeze. Closing her eyes, she smiled as soft feminine voices, carried on the wind, seeped into her ears—whispers of her kinfolk, which spoke of fortitude and the price of freedom.

Her chin lifted, determination coursing through her veins. Her plan of last resort just became her next move. She would not perish trapped in a cave. She marched over to an extra plaid and grabbed up its length. Then she folded it lengthwise and knotted the fabric into a large loop. With an equally resolute stride, she walked the short distance back to the opening and took hold of the rope around which she firmly tied the ends of the plaid. Then she pulled the loop over her head and down her hips until it rested beneath the curve of her bottom. She sat into the make-shift harness, testing the strength of her knot. It appeared solid. Shoney's eyes darted from the misty darkness below to the inviting warmth of the well-lit cave. Doubt began to take hold as her fingers shook with fear, but she found her warrior's spirit, sounded her battle cry and slid from the entrance.

The knot held. A crazed laugh slipped from her lips as she breathed great sighs of relief. The victory was short lived. She began to feel the strain of supporting her weight, despite the aid of her harness.

She resisted the impulse to look down to the lethal rocks below; the sight of which she knew was capable of stealing the last of her

courage. With one hand grasping the rope, she used the other to loosen the knot of the harness. She held her breath as she gently tugged the fabric. She needed to achieve a delicate balance. The rope should pass through the knot but not untie altogether. With the knot of the harness loosened, she shimmied down a short length of the rope and then secured the knot once more. She smiled. It worked. She repeated the process, each time pulling the knot further down the rope.

Despite her triumph, she fought to remain calm as she continued to progress. Her arms were weary. Her palms blistered and burned, doing battle with the coarse fibers. She dared peek down for the first time and sighed with relief. Suspended in the air halfway from the water's surface and clear of the rocks, she was out of immediate harm. Upon realizing her proximity to freedom, she felt her energy renew. She hastened her pace, scooting further down the rope. Her burning palms screamed for her to stop, but still she pushed on. She was too close to give up now.

"Is my little viper, escaping?"

She froze not daring to breathe. She felt the rope pull taut and sway as he began his ascent.

"Are you racing back to the arms of your betrothed, or are you late meeting your clansmen to discuss your newest attack?" He sneered.

What was he talking about?

She tried to pull herself up the rope—why—she did not know. 'Tis not as if she could climb to safety. There was only one place to go, back into the infernal cave.

Her efforts produced little result as her tired arms protested her exertions by shooting sharp pains from her shoulders to her fingertips. She made one last attempt to raise her body, but she didn't budge. Then his arm reached over her head, grabbing the rope, and in one swift and seemingly effortless move, they were face to face, their noses just a breath apart.

"I told you not to lie to me," He growled.

Chapter 7

She stood before him. Her stance could only be described as defiant. He expected her to be humble, even afraid of what would happen now that she had been found out. Instead, she held herself like a queen. And aided by the soft glow of the fire, her hair shone like spun gold, lending her a regal beauty as if she were clothed in bejeweled satin rather than homespun wool.

"Hellfire," he swore.

Once again, he allowed himself to be distracted by her appeal. He straightened his shoulders, resolved to remain focused. Any surprise she still harbored at being caught attempting escape was well hidden. She stood poised for a fight, but he wasn't going to give her what she expected.

He walked to the rear of the cave and grabbed a thick cut of peat, which he tossed on the fire. Then taking a few strips of dried meat, he reclined by the flames and nonchalantly said, "I found your pendant."

He stared at her, waiting for her reply.

"Oh," she said.

"Yes. I found it around the neck of my clansman who had been beaten nigh to death."

She swallowed slowly and wilted. The warrior faded and the vulnerable maid emerged. He removed his dirk from its sheath and started to clean his nails with the tip, giving the task all of his attention.

"We caught up with the men responsible," he slowly raised his head and met her gaze. "It was the MacLeans. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Her lips moved as though she wanted to speak, but she did not utter a word. He had accomplished the impossible. She was rendered speechless.

"If you wish to refrain from commenting on the attack suffered by my friend, then perhaps you may have something to say about the attack on my village."

Her eyes widened with what looked like disbelief but Ronan knew better. He could smell her fear. She exhausted her store of lies and now resembled a small prey backed into the corner, which made him the predator. He sprang to his feet. She retreated until her back pressed against the hard rock of the cave. He surrounded her with his large frame.

"Bridget MacLean, you are in league with your clansmen against the MacKinnon."

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“You were behind the attack on my village,” he snarled.

Her voice was barely a whisper. “No, Ronan, I swear I do not know of what you speak.”

“Do you expect me to believe you when you’ve done naught but lie to me since our paths first crossed,” he shouted. “Admit you have lied to me, damn it.”

“Yes,” she shouted, “yes, I lied to you.”

He stared at her but did not speak. He knew she needed no more prodding. Her breaths quickened, and her head jerked left and right as though searching for a secret passage way to safety. He cupped her chin and forced her to meet his gaze.

“The truth,” he said.

Her voice was a whisper, “I have lied, Ronan, but ‘tis not what you think.”

“Are you going to ply me with your forked tongue again?” he sneered. “A viper even when pressed, I see. Do you even know the meaning of truth, honor?”

Instantly, her grey eyes deepened to hard steel as they narrowed with accusing intent. “Do not speak to me of honor, Ronan, descendent of King MacAlpin, false heir to the throne.” She pressed a finger into his chest. “Your people are the true vipers and thieves.”

“What are you talking about?” he said, more confused than ever.

She was mad.

“Although I do not understand why he is pertinent to our conversation since he has been dead for centuries, but King MacAlpin ruled the lands that would become Scotland, including those owned by the MacLeans. He was your king too.”

“He was never King to my people,” she said through gritted teeth. “I am neither MacLean nor MacKinnon. I am Shoney, daughter of Brethia, descendent of Tharain and of Oengus, King of the Picts.”

He stared at her with wide eyes, his mouth slightly agape. Then he burst out laughing.

“You expect me to believe Tharain is dead and you are now the Witch of Dervaig.”

“I am not a witch,” she shouted and pushed past him.

He reached out and grabbed a fist full of plaid and pulled her back to face him.

“Tharain is not dead,” he spat. “I saw her only weeks ago. She has no daughter, and even if she did, you are too young to be born of that old hag, witch or not.”

She screamed with rage and came at him with fists flying. He had to admit a few of her blows were well placed and stung for all that she weighed no more than a bag of wool. He managed to pin her arms at

her sides.

"I'm sorry if my words offended you, lass, but you must have known I would see through this new farce of yours."

She gulped for breaths but managed to spit out, "Tharain was my ancestor not my mother and died long ago. My mother was Brethia, beautiful and brave. She wore the tattered cloak of her ancestors and made herself the crone, just as her mother did, as did all of our forebears. 'Tis nothing more than a disguise."

Madness. Her story was pure madness, but was she so in doubt of his sanity to think he would believe her tale?

"I am impressed with the ingenuity of your lies, but this is absurd," he said. She carried on, not heeding his words.

"My mother concealed me, kept me hidden away to protect me from the cruelty of the clan. She carried on the tradition of the cloak to ensure every Gael remained afraid." Tears of fury gathered in her eyes and began a slow course down her cheeks.

"She gave you what you wanted," she shouted. "You wanted a witch. She gave you a witch."

He had to concede she was a damn convincing liar. The tears and rage added a compelling force of indignant sincerity, but despite the absorbing performance and the beauty of the actress, he reached his limits. The one character flaw he abhorred most was deceitfulness.

"So to review, Tharain is dead, and I have never seen you before because your mother, who is the Witch of Dervaig, has kept you hidden all this time," he said dryly.

"No," she answered.

"No, your mother is not the Witch?"

"My mother is dead. She died three years ago. *I* am the Witch of Dervaig."

"You are telling me for the past three years, *you* have lit the pit fires in the Witch's hut, and *your* cloaked figure has been seen hunched over, shuffling across the moors?"

"Yes. Is there something the matter with your ears? I am the Witch of Dervaig."

Ronan took her hand and began to lead her to the cave entrance. If she wanted to play this game, then he would oblige her. "Well then come along, my dear. I shall walk you home."

In her gateless prison above the sea she dreamt of her return home, a trip she expected to make on her own, alone. The reality could not have been farther from the dream. She was not alone, a fact made even more real by the tightening of Ronan's hand around her waist. She puzzled over his motivation for riding out to her home when he clearly did not believe her, which was another baffling point, because

at least the truth was plausible. The clan believed the Witch of Dervaig had haunted the moors for centuries, and the price of her longevity—her soul. A fanciful legend blinded him to the truth. Perhaps, he was not as shrewd as she first thought, or his conviction of belief might be a testimony to her forbears' mastery of concealment. They hid their offspring well and never, ever revealed their true identities.

"Except for love," she murmured as she inhaled Ronan's scent.

Love somehow found its way into the life of every Dervaig woman. Her mother's heart was lost to love, but she refused to speak of Shoney's father. Her gray eyes darkened with stormy sadness whenever Shoney mentioned the affair. Eventually, she stopped asking altogether to save her mother from the pain of remembering. His name, how they met, how long their affair lasted, she would never know. She used to believe love was the only force strong enough to remove the cloak. She imagined her mother crossing the moors obscured beneath the tattered darkness when suddenly her father appeared. Love permitted his eyes to penetrate the ugly folds of the cloak and see the beauty beneath, but now she knew her childhood daydream was just that—a dream.

Apparently, a prize buck was all that was required to unmask the Witch of Dervaig. Doubtless, it was some careless action that also revealed her mother's true identity. If only she had stayed away from the woods on that fateful day, she would be at home, enjoying the safe predictability of faceless, traceless anonymity. Instead, she raced over the moors imprisoned in the steel embrace of a very skeptical and angry man, a man who knew her true name and lineage. She still could not believe it. Now, to the outside world, she really did exist.

Mother of all, what had she done?

On the one hand, she felt relieved. She wanted to run cloakless over the moors in broad day light, shouting her name and ancestry for all to hear. On the other hand, terrific fear consumed her, making her throat tight and her stomach churn. He would come to know the truth soon enough, and then the whole of the Clan MacKinnon would know there was no gruesome hag. Would they fear her still, or would they banish her from the island or worse? She felt the hairs on her neck stand straight up as a shiver coursed down her spin. They might burn her alive.

Ronan thankfully interrupted her thoughts as he brought his horse to a halt. She could just make out the shadowed outline of her hut against the night sky.

"There is the house of the Witch of Dervaig, an old crone who has lived for centuries. Anyone who dares trespass will be turned into rock and sunk beneath the heather, lost for all eternity."

“Is that really what you believe?” Shoney could not help but chuckle.

“’Tis not too late to admit who you really are,” he said as he nudged his horse forward.

Clearly, he was expecting her to be overwhelmed with fear and beg him to turn his horse away. She said nothing as they continued on.

“All you have to do is tell me the truth, Bridget, and I will turn around,” he said.

She pinched herself to keep from laughing. His voice contained a nervous edge and his body stiffened, the tension increasing with every stride. He was scared.

“My name is Shoney,” she said softly. “I am descended of Eithne, the fierce Pictish warrior princess and you, Ronan, future laird of the Mackinnon, are afraid.”

She decided to add being called a coward to the list of things Ronan disliked, because he drove his heels into his horse’s flanks and raced the last distance to her house. Sliding off his mount, he pulled her down and motioned to the oversized doorway with the fanged snake carving.

“After you,” he said.

Shoney flashed him the sweetest smile she could muster then pushed the door open and walked inside. Straightaway, she knelt by the cool fire pit. When the flames burned brightly, its soft glow illuminating the inside of her quarters, she motioned to the figure standing in her doorway.

“You are welcome, Ronan. Please do not be afraid. You showed me great hospitality in your cave. I’d like to return the favor.” She pulled a chair close to the fire
and gave him an encouraging smile. “I promise you are safe here.”

He stood motionless in the doorway. “Enough of this, Bridget…er…Shoney…whatever your name is.” He took a step toward her with his arm outstretched. “If she catches us here, there is no telling what she will do. We must go. Now.”

She saw the panic in his eyes and took his hands in hers. “Hear me, Ronan,” she beseeched. “This is my home.” She smiled and pointed to the other side of the room. “I will prove it to you. Look inside the box beside my pallet. You will find a necklace made from small, white seashells.”

“Not another necklace, Bridget.”

She blushed remembering her earlier deceit. “I am sorry for lying to you before, but it was the only way to help your friend.”

“So you admit to knowing about Aidan’s attack.” Ronan was beginning to look ill.

“We’ll discuss that later. Just open it,” she urged, pointing to the

small box.

At first, he hesitated. Then he stuck his head outside, looking left then right. When he was apparently satisfied the old hag of his childhood nightmares was not lurking just outside the door he turned, took a deep breath, and walked over to her pallet. Beads of sweat glistened across his brow. He bent down keeping one hand on the hilt of his sword as he slowly lifted the lid on the box. His head whipped around, and he stared at her in disbelief as he held out the necklace she described.

"You *are* the Witch of Dervaig," he whispered.

Suddenly, a log snapped in the fire pit, causing Ronan to jump. Then, to Shoney's utter amazement, he turned and sprinted out the door.

She called after him, but his only acknowledgment of her appeal was to run faster. When she heard his horse galloping away, she knew he was gone. Leaning against the door frame, she gazed into the night and imagined that he reined in his mount and watched her beyond the shadows. The fire's glow at her back would allow him to see her while he remained obscured by darkness. For the first time in her life, she could not bring herself to turn away from the night as she watched with hope for his return.

For days, she had wanted nothing else but to go home, and now that she had her wish, she felt suffocated. The walls of her hut used to mean comfort and safety. Now, she felt hemmed in. She traded one prison for another, but just like Ronan's cave suspended in air, this cell needed no bars. Her legend was her warden. She was the Witch of Dervaig.

She pulled at the folds of the plaid in which Aidan had so deftly wrapped her. At least she would always have his colors by which to remember him.

"Mother of all, listen to yourself," she said as she slammed the door with disgust.

She yearned for someone who by all accounts she should despise. She tried to convince herself it was not him she missed but companionship. Beyond the fleeting and hurried visits of distressed women seeking her aid, it had been three years since she spoke to anyone other than animals and trees. She had to admit it felt good. Then she remembered his strong arms around her waist, the scent of his skin, and the fire of his kiss branding her neck, and she conceded to having enjoyed more than just his conversation.

"Damn it," she cursed. He was gone. He fled her side, and she would never see him again.

Chapter 8

Ronan looked to the sky, disbelief and confusion played a game of domination in his mind. Finally, shock won out. He had stood within the Witch's hut, or was it Shoney's hut? She said the Witch was a ruse, a trick, only Shoney in disguise.

Shoney: the most beautiful and bravest of creatures ever to be seen or malevolent servant of the Devil.

He groaned as his hands gripped his head in frustration. Surely, this was trickery. The old crone cast a spell to cover her wrinkles and warts with the freshness of youth and divinity's beauty.

But her eyes.

He summoned her deep smoky eyes from memory. Could a spell conjure such innocence, such candor and passion?

Mounting his horse in a daze, he rode toward the village. He started out at a light clip, but then he sped up and raced home as if Satan licked at his heals.

In the morning, he awoke still plagued by questions. Had it all been a dream, or worse yet, witchcraft? Perhaps the Witch sought to seduce him and poison his mind in order to gain control of the clan. If that was the case, he certainly did not advance the cause of his people. With shame he remembered how he fled like a whelp facing battle for the first time. He growled, throwing off his blankets, and began pacing his rooms housed in the keep of Dun Ara Castle.

All morning the Witch and Shoney battled for existence in his mind. One moment, he was certain Shoney's depth of character belied the possibility she was merely the product of artifice. The next, Shoney was erased by a lifetime of believing the Witch of Dervaig toiled for one purpose only, to cruelly use anyone naïve enough to fall into her trap. Whether a witch or an angel, there was only one way to find out —he was going back.

Ronan scanned the hills, ensuring no one was nearby to witness his western bearing. To further obscure his path he left Gribun without his horse to avoid making tracks. Knots twisted his stomach the closer he drew to the Witch's hut, and he questioned whether he should have left some indication of his journey's end just in case he was wrong about Shoney. But it was too late. He glimpsed the Witch's hut looming in the distance.

Doubt clouded his mind, and he fought the urge to turn back. If he could lead his men into battle against barbarous Vikings, then he could face whatever awaited him behind the snake fangs of the

wooden door. But as he passed beyond where his kin dared to tread, terror—rooted deep in his mind by a lifetime of belief—broke the surface of his control. Perhaps, she had lied, and when he reached his destination, it would not be fair Shoney who greeted him, but the hag who would no doubt unleash a fury of curses upon his trespassing hide.

"God's bones," he swore as perspiration dripped from his brow.

He was nervous.

Hell, he was terrified.

It was one thing to stand against a flesh and blood warrior who was every bit as mortal as he, but his sword was no match for sorcery. If he was wrong, and Shoney was nothing more than an illusion, then he was damned.

He stopped and took a deep breath. Shoney was not the stuff of dreams. She was a woman of flesh and blood. He forged ahead, keeping his eyes fastened on the ground. Stepping over one of the Dervaig Stones, he knew he was almost there. Then, as though in a dream, he stood at the large round door, sweat dripping from his brow as he searched for the courage to knock.

Shoney's birthright was solitude, and it weighed on her young shoulders as never before. She fought to stand straight, to keep her spirit strong, but now that she had tasted another's company it was even harder to reconcile herself to her fate. For a distraction, she put water to boil and tidied her already impeccably clean home. As she lifted the pot from the fire a knock at the door cut through the silence she was trying to ignore. Shoney jumped and the hot contents spilled over the rim, causing her to shriek as she pulled the wet plaid she still wore away from the sensitive skin of her thigh.

"Bridget…er…Shoney?"

It was Ronan. Her heart began to pound.

Again the knock sounded. Still holding the sodden wool off her skin, she started to lift the latch on the door when it occurred to her that he may not be alone. He could have rounded up an army ready to cleanse the Isle of Mull of the evil witch once and for all.

"Ronan, is it you?" she whispered.

"Were you expecting someone else, lass?" he said.

"Are you alone?"

"Aye, Shoney. You've naught to fear. I'm not leading a witch hunt."

Without seeing his eyes she could not tell if he spoke the truth.

"Shoney, talk to me. I cannot read your mind. I might remind you that between the two of us, I am not the one suspected of having the powers of magic."

He teased her to make light of the moment, but he was holding

something back. She could hear it in his voice.

"Shoney, I need to speak to you. Please let me in. Standing alone outside this place, staring into the eyes of your serpent is testing my courage like never before."

Fear tainted his voice not deceit. She slowly opened the door and peered out. His height and breadth of shoulder blocked out the sun as she gazed into his nervous eyes. She took a deep breath and opened the door all the way. He accepted her invitation to enter but refused to sit in the chair by the fire.

"I am warm enough, thank you," he said.

He surveyed her small quarters. She followed his gaze about the room suddenly very self-conscious. She had never seen inside the homes in the village and did not know how they compared. She was glad for the dried lavender on the ground. The flowers' soft perfume filled the air. He paused in front of her great wooden table. He seemed to be considering the contents of the pouches and her various tools.

"You are a healer?" His voice betrayed his trepidation.

Walking over to where he stood, she pretended to busy herself with crushing some herbs and replied, "Aye, I am a healer not a witch, Ronan."

He tensed next to her.

"Nor was my mother," she continued. "I do believe in the strength of the gods of the earth and the heavens, but my skills are for healing. Sadly, few benefit from my knowledge."

"Few?" his face showed his surprise. "Do you mean to say people have sought your skills?"

"Don't look so shocked, Ronan. Women from your own clan have been visiting this hut since before the days of Tharain."

"MacKinnon women have come here? Why?" he asked. She ignored the fact that he seemed appalled by the notion.

"MacKinnon and MacLean women visit in the night," she replied. "They come when they cannot find help elsewhere."

Ronan lifted a clay pot containing a pungent mix of seaweed and nettle. Shoney watched his face crinkle with distaste as the pot was returned to the table.

"That can't be true. The MacKinnon clan cares for its own women. We too have healers."

"No doubt, but my mother told me your religion teaches you to fear women, and so you silence them."

"'Tis not our religion that creates fear, Bridget…"

"Shoney," she interrupted. "My name is Shoney." He looked as though he did not like being reminded.

"'Tis not our religion that creates fear, Shoney." He began again. She smiled, enjoying her name on his lips. "Men are born of sin," he

continued. “We must fear our own wickedness and repent.”

“And what of women?” she asked, turning her back to him.

She moved to stand by the fire. When he did not reply she sought his gaze. His eyes glowed with amber intensity as they bore into hers, searing a path straight to her soul. Her gaze faltered as she looked at her feet.

“We love our women, Shoney,” he said in a low voice. “We protect and cherish our women.”

When she again met his gaze, she stopped breathing altogether, startled by the desire she saw in their depths. Deep warmth spread across her face.

What magic was this? Why did he have this hold over her?

He was the enemy, the descendent of King MacAlpin. She despised him and blamed him for her loneliness. Why should he not suffer the consequences for his ancestor’s choices just as she must? She should be fighting him not desiring him.

“You destroyed my people,” she said, the words bursting from her lips.

His eyes widened in disbelief, “Your people? Shoney, what is the matter with you?”

“You are a Gael, descended of King MacAlpin.” She stood with her arms akimbo, ready for battle. “Your descendants seized the throne of the Picts, our lands, our way of life. ‘Tis because of your people, Ronan, that my life is spent cloaked in solitude. I am accused of witchcraft because of you.” Her voice broke. She was losing control, but she did not care. “You are the reason why my mother died with fear in her eyes, fear for my safety, for my happiness.”

He backed away from her. “Your people?” he said. “My people? Shoney, you speak of wrongs centuries old, and I’m afraid I must mention that your knowledge of history is somewhat lacking.”

“My mother warned me never to believe your lies,” she yelled.

“The Gaels and the Picts did their share of fighting to be sure, but the Gaels did not defeat the Picts. Both peoples were forced to converge or face annihilation at the hands of the Vikings.”

“You are lying.”

“Believe me or not, but Kenneth MacAlpin was very much a Pictish king as was his son, Aed. A Gaelic king did rule temporarily after he assassinated Aed.”

“So you admit that a Gael stole the Pictish throne,” Shoney interrupted.

“Aye, but his brief reign did not mark the beginning of Scotland or the diminishment of the Picts in history—that, my dear, can be blamed on a Pictish king.”

“Your version of history is lacking in logic,” she scoffed.

“I am not finished.” He snapped, but he composed himself before continuing. “When Aed was murdered, his son, Constantine, and nephew, Dugald, were both too young to rule. They were secreted away to a Gaelic monastery in Ireland. They returned when they were grown to avenge their King and they succeeded. At least according to bloodlines, a Pictish throne was restored. But Constantine and Dugald had spent their formative years within a Gaelic monastery. They were no longer young Pictish princes. They had grown into Gaelic men. Constantine called himself King of Scotland and openly encouraged the spread of Gaelic tradition.”

“Now ‘tis your turn for telling stories,” she sneered. “What fool taught you such lies?”

“In my youth before my brother’s passing, my father sent me to the monastery on Iona to study. My story is backed by volumes of written evidence, by the markings of graves, by ratifications and agreements.”

“Writing is a privilege reserved for the powerful. My mother’s word is worth far more than the words recorded by traitors and thieves,” she replied, raising her chin defiantly.

“Shoney, listen to me,” he said. She turned away, determined to ignore him, but he continued anyway. “It has been many centuries since the days when the Picts and the Gaels were separate peoples. The past cannot be undone, especially one that happened so long ago.”

Madder than ever, Shoney railed at him, “You speak of a time centuries ago, and yet I am this very day shunned and feared by your people.”

Ronan’s voice intensified, revealing his growing frustration. “Not by reason of your Pictish blood, Shoney, for it flows in my veins too. ‘Tis your pagan idolatry the people fear.” He picked up her carving of Taranis, the god of thunder, and thrust it in her face.

“My gods are born of this land, Ronan MacKinnon. I am born of this land.” She shouted.

In a soft voice he said, “My God is of all lands, Shoney.”

She started to reply, but he closed his hand over her mouth.

“Enough of this, please, Shoney. I am no priest. My sins, I’m sure, are many, and I will not feign being holy enough to judge the soul of any man or woman. *I* have never wronged you.” Then his face reddened as he hastily added, “with the exception of the bruises on your arms, a little jostling, and a few stolen caresses, which you could hold against me for the rest of our days if you wished, but,” he smiled as he removed his hand from her mouth, “I sincerely hope you do not.”

Shoney eyed him with suspicion. “What you are asking for then is a truce,” she said.

“Aye, I suppose I am.” He took a step back and extended his hand for her to accept.

“Shoney, join me,” he said, his voice rich with formality. “Together we can end the blood wars of our ancestors with an alliance of our own. Once, a long time ago, we were sworn enemies. Now, we will be bonded in friendship.”

She turned from him suddenly weary. “I do desire to be your friend, Ronan. I’ll not deny this, but to surrender would cast me under the dark cloak of shame. A darker mantle than even that worn by the Witch of Dervaig, and what’s more, its folds would defile my mother’s rest.”

“I do not ask you to swear allegiance to Scotland or to the MacKinnon for that matter. I ask not for your surrender. We are simply establishing a peace. And Shoney,” his voice beckoned for her to meet his gaze, “there is never shame in peace.”

Her mind raced and her heart pounded. She wanted nothing more than to accept his hand and have for the first time in her life a friend, but her mother warned her about the true nature of men. At their best, she cautioned, they were capricious and quick to make vows that later went unfulfilled, and at their worst, they were foul beasts.

“I am but one of many women who have lived behind these walls, hidden by cloak and full of regret,” she said. “Do you think you are the first man to stand here with hand extended? I had a father, Ronan. So too did my mother.”

“But *I* have never stood here. Not all men are the same, Shoney. If you wish me to leave, I will. But remember, I do not seek to change you or bend your will. I only wish to be your friend.”

She searched his eyes for some sign of deception, but his gaze held only truth. Perhaps it was wrong to punish him for past crimes. Should he be blamed for the solitary lives the Dervaig women had chosen to lead, swearing never to accept Scottish rule? By taking his hand in friendship, she did not surrender the enduring struggle of her ancestors, the fight even her own mother refused to concede. It only signified a blessed release from the silence and despondency of solitude.

Very slowly, she reached out and took Ronan’s hand, resisting the desire to smile. She had never had a friend before. She blushed as the touch of his strong hand made her think of his powerful grip on her bare waist beneath the surface of her seaside pool. The heat of his touch had warmed her despite the chilly water until she melted into him. She looked from his giant hand cradling hers to his bright amber eyes and lost herself in his lazy, sideways smile. Then she cleared her throat, deciding it would be wise to look elsewhere. She took her hand back and busied herself with replenishing the fire.

“So, you said your village has healers?” she asked, trying to redirect her thoughts away from his golden skin and thickly muscled shoulders.

“Indeed,” he answered.

“And they are skilled in herbs?”

“Aye, perhaps one day you will meet and exchange knowledge.”

Shoney whirled around, “You think I might be welcomed by your clan?” she said skeptically.

“I may remind you, my dear, one day I will be laird.”

“When?” she asked.

“My father has no brothers. I am next in line. When he passes unto heaven, the…”

“No,” Shoney interrupted, “I mean to say, when will you take me to Gribun?”

He threw his head back and laughed, evidently enjoying her enthusiasm. “When the time is right, I promise you, I will take you to the village, but for now the hour grows late. I must return.”

She shook her head to object. She did not want him to leave. She wanted to talk further about visiting the village.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. “Do not fret, Shoney. I will return,” he whispered. “Never forget we are friends.”

She waved goodbye from the doorway until he disappeared over the sloping moors. Evening approached. Its dim light cast the hills a deeper shade of green, and she could hear the breaking waves against the cliffs behind her. She lingered, enjoying the warm spring air and all the while remembered Ronan’s promise to return and bring her to the village. For the first time since her mother passed she was excited about the future. Having surrendered nothing, sacrificed nothing, she had altered her destiny. Her life could no longer be mapped out as a series of lonely days until she died. She had a friend, and for the first time in her life—at least until she was gifted with a vision—she knew not what her future held.

Chapter 9

Ronan was nervous as he stood at Shoney's door but for very different reasons than when he last paid her a visit. A fortnight had passed since she accepted his hand in friendship, but not for a moment had she been absent from his thoughts. Longing made for sleepless nights and distracted days. There was no denying that his regard for her went beyond friendship.

He took a deep breath and knocked. She did not answer. He raised his hand to knock again but stopped when he heard a song drifting on the breeze. A voice like dark honey wrapped around him. Its enchanted sound was languid and old, and even though the words were Gaelic, the song's meaning was unfamiliar. It was a story of the gods and of war and then renewal.

He rounded the corner of the hut, following the plaintive sound, and then he saw her. Golden hair danced about her waist in tangled disarray and gleamed in the low morning sun. Despite the chill in the air, she wore only a kirtle, which revealed her arms to the shoulders. Across her face and along both arms were intricate pictures painted blue to match the summer sky. On each cheek was a large swirling circle. The same circles could be found on her arms, but there were also knots and animals. He saw a stag, birds, a seal, and fish.

He inhaled sharply at the sight of her. Never could he have imagined a woman more alluring or more forbidden. He had lain awake all night with thoughts of her silken skin and soft curves and knew she had to be his. He resolved to rescue her from the solitude she despised, to give her the life she deserved. But as her tousled hair fell back to reveal her painted profile, he knew introducing her to the clan would prove more difficult than he first imagined. If he had thought for a moment their differences were insignificant, the sight of her in all her pagan glory put that assertion to rest. Even if he could convince the clan she was a maid and the Witch was only the stuff of legend, Father Colin would certainly not consider Shoney to be a child of Christ. He suppressed a chuckle as he pictured the good Father's reaction were he to see her painted, half-naked, and singing to the gods.

She continued to sing unaware of his presence. He longed to remain unseen, to gaze unabashedly at the sensual sway of her hips as she moved, lost in the lulling refrain, but he did not wish to intrude if unwelcome.

"Hello, Shoney," he said.

She jumped and turned to see who spoke. At first, trepidation

constricted her features, but when she saw who stood by, a wide smile spread across her face. He felt an odd gratification knowing it was he who put it there.

"Ronan, welcome," she said.

"I'm sorry to intrude on whatever it is you are doing," he said hesitantly.

"We are friends," she smiled. "You will never be an intruder here. Besides, I pray to the gods today on your behalf."

"On my behalf?" he said not bothering to conceal his surprise.

"You said your people will soon be at war. I pray for your protection, but I am not finished."

She moved to stand beside a large rock, which was hollowed out to form a basin. Then she picked up a clay bowl and poured what looked like milk into the rock all the while mumbling an indiscernible chant.

"There," she said when the bowl was emptied, "I am finished."

"What did you just do?" he asked.

"The Long-haired one is very powerful. He is a great sorcerer and warrior. I gave him an oblation of milk."

Not knowing how to respond, he shrugged and said, "to be sure" as though the observance of pagan offerings was a routine occurrence.

"Why do you make war with the Norse?" she asked.

Standing near an oblation stone, next to the hut formerly thought to belong to an evil witch, he was relieved for the change of conversation to something familiar. "I told you of how the Vikings retain ownership of the Western Isles. Scotland's King, Alexander the III, aims to unite the country, but he was denied purchase of the Hebrides by the Norse King, Haakon."

"Have you any sympathy for the Norse interest here?"

"Actually, most islanders have Norse ties. In fact, the king is a distant MacKinnon relation through marriage."

"Then your enemy is also your family?" Shoney asked.

"That was a union befitting the times, but it was a time long ago. Findanus MacKinnon married a Norse princess nicknamed Saucy Mary. Her marriage dowry included lands on Skye together with Dunakin Castle, which are still MacKinnon lands to this day."

"Saucy Mary is a strange sort of name," Shoney said.

"Well, she was a strange sort of lass. Mary earned the title after she ordered a chain run across the water from Dunakin to the Scottish mainland in order to halt the passing ships. The chain would drop beneath the water, allowing the ship to pass, but only after the Captain paid a toll."

Shoney chuckled, "I think I would have liked her."

Of course Shoney would admire his audacious ancestor. "No doubt you would have enjoyed many foolhardy adventures together, but that

was a time long ago. Today, our allegiance rests only with Scotland, and King Alexander plans to seize what he cannot purchase."

"If war is at hand, Ronan, then you should not delay at introducing me to your father. I can fight. I have the skills of a warrior."

He threw his head back with laughter. But without hesitation, she seized his dirk from beneath his plaid and pressed the tip just below his waist, silencing his amusement.

"I would not laugh so heartily at my expense, lest you find yourself missing a favored appendage," she said, smiling sweetly.

She was swift with a blade. This much he had to concede given she wielded a knife that moments before had been securely sheathed against his own thigh, but her foolish warmongering was reckless. Her mother trained her to strike with steel and find her target, but her slight build rendered her skills worthless. Did she not realize he could break her neck with one hand before she drew her next breath? He grabbed hold of her hand, reclaiming his weapon with ease.

"Women are not warriors, Shoney."

"You are mistaken, Ronan. My ancestors were great warriors," she said.

"The men, perhaps, but women have never been warriors, at least not for many, many centuries. Adomnan's Law of Innocents disproves your claim."

"The word of my mother is all the evidence I need. I don't care if your people outlawed women warriors. The Picts certainly did not."

"Adomnan's Law did not exclude women; it protected them. It was a decree by the Abbot of Iona some six-hundred years ago and protected not just women but also children and monks during times of war. The decree was accepted as law by all of the kingdoms, including the Picts. Innocents had not the tools, skills, or inclination to make war but were often its victims."

"With training anyone may fight, and inclination is found when one's home is under the threat of the torch and one's life under the blade," she replied.

She was like no maid he had ever met. Her spirit and sense of honor were unmatched. She stood before him defiant even in defeat. Her unpinned golden curls were perpetually tangled and the confident and stormy depths of her eyes mesmerized.

"You have some skill, Shoney, but not the strength."

Her eyes narrowed as she turned on her heel and stamped inside. He could not help but admire how the thin fabric of her kirtle revealed her shapely buttocks and the swing of her slim hips. He followed after, wondering how he would soothe her anger once again.

"I never thought I would meet anyone with a temper to match my own," he said as he ducked his head beneath the door frame.

“I apologize, Shoney,” he began. “I did not mean to suggest that I found women lacking. They are sacred. They hold the breath of God in their bodies. They make and sustain life. Their bodies are meant to be cherished, savored not spoiled by war.”

She turned and met his gaze. He walked toward her and reached out to stroke her cheek. She did not flinch at his touch.

“You are courageous, Shoney, but look at how fine you are.” He took a step closer and inhaled the lavender scent of her hair. His finger traced the stag that adorned her shoulder.

“They are beautiful.”

“They are sacred images of the gods,” she said. “The stag symbolizes Fionn who is a great warrior. The knots and circles represent the Mother of all.”

“And what of the seal and fish?” Ronan asked as he extended her arm and slowly traced a large fish painted on the soft skin of her forearm.

“They are to celebrate Shoney,” she smiled, “who is the god of the sea.”

“You were named after a god?” he asked.

“My mother wanted to ensure an abundance of fish at her table,” she smiled.

“The circles on your cheeks are for the Mother of all, but what of the solid expanse of blue on your chest?” His fingers grazed the delicate skin of her neck and above her kirtle where a deep blue, darker than the rest, covered.

“That is for Skatha. She is the goddess of shadows. Whenever I perform a ritual, I always remember Skatha. Each time I pray she removes my fear of the dark.” She cast her eyes to the ground as she spoke, clearly embarrassed of her weakness.

He despised the isolation of her home. She would be imprisoned come nightfall by her fear. He wanted nothing more than to save her from ever being afraid again.

“I am sorry I angered you,” he whispered.

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” she smiled.

“God’s blood,” he swore aloud as he stepped away from her intoxicating scent and exotically painted and partially-clad form.

He ran his hand through his hair in frustration. He could not stay there one moment longer. She clouded his mind with desire, but it was not a simple desire of the flesh. To be sure, he wanted to tear her kirtle and reveal her proud breasts and slim curves, the memory of which were seared into his mind, but more than that, he wanted to protect her. In her own mind, she was fierce, and she certainly was valiant, but he saw her innocence, her small stature, and fear. Whether she knew it or not, she needed saving. Now he just had to

figure out how to surmount the many obstacles standing between Shoney and Gribun.

“I have to go.” His gaze met confused eyes.

“I could go with you, Ronan,” she said, her voice filled with hope.

“Now is not the time, Shoney.”

“The way you so readily offered to take me to the village led me to believe it was a simple matter. Can you not use your sway as laird?”

“Need I remind you I am not yet laird, and regardless, introducing you is no simple matter. We must be careful and patient and wait for the right moment.”

She cast her eyes away to stare at the heavens not trying to hide her disappointment, but there was naught he could do at that moment. He had yet to conceive of how he would bring Shoney into the clan, but he would find a way.

“I promise you, Shoney, you will stand in the village and be welcomed when the time is right.” He cupped her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Besides, I think mayhap your current attire is less than appropriate,” he said as his eyes once again traveled the length of her slim legs to her lean torso and to the gentle slope of her breasts, all of which were barely

concealed by her thin kirtle.

“I see your point,” she blushed.

As he waved goodbye and began his cautious walk home, he contemplated how he was going to bring Shoney—his pagan princess, named for a false god—to Gribun. By the time he made it home unseen, he was certain of one thing only. Shoney would never be welcomed by his clan.

Chapter 10

"Where have you been?" Nathair hissed as Ronan took his seat in the great hall. He could feel the penetrating stare of the other council members.

It was a question Ronan was accustomed to hearing as of late. For the past few weeks he had slipped away every chance he could to visit Shoney, and with each passing day demand on both fronts grew. Nathair's palpable impatience made it nigh impossible to thwart his questions, and Shoney's disillusionment intensified every time he told her today would not be the day he took her to Gribun. There was a solution that would appease his father and permit Shoney to enter the village; he just needed a little more time to discover it.

"What have you to report?" Nathair asked, addressing the room.

Argyle stood. "The tacksmen have given me a full account, and it would seem the cottars have completed the plant."

"Thank you, Argyle," Nathair said. Then he turned and addressed the elder sitting to Ronan's left. He was a large fellow, bent with years, with a long flowing beard and sharp, clever eyes.

"Alasdair, what of the rents?"

"They will not have to be raised to ready the clan for war. There is enough in the coffer to buy what is needed, and our stores are strong."

Nathair nodded. "Good," he said. "There are no disputes to settle, nor is there any news from the king." He stood, signaling an end to the meeting.

Ronan rose to leave, but a strong hand came to rest on his forearm.

"'Tis interesting what Argyle said about the plant, because the keep's rows have yet to be ploughed. I believe I asked you to oversee this task, Ronan."

"Aye, Father," Ronan said, "it will be done on the morrow."

"That I do not doubt, but, Ronan, you've been distracted as of late. Is there some matter of which I am unaware?"

"Nay, Father."

Nathair stared unspeaking into Ronan's eyes for several moments. "Be sure there isn't," he said as he turned on his heel and left the keep.

With both fists gripping the reins, Ronan walked backward through the field near the keep, managing the six cattle whose bulk and muscle moved the unwieldy plough through the earth. The ploughman, a cottar named Colin whom Ronan's father showed particular favor owing to his shrewd mind and boundless energy,

steered the plough from the side. Meanwhile, Colin's lanky son, Ewan, encouraged the animals' progress with a light switch.

"Ronan," Colin called, "when your father asked you to oversee the plough, I don't think he meant you should take it up yourself. My son, Errol, will guide the cattle."

"One clan, one back," Ronan gritted as he strained to keep the beasts in check. "The honor found on this field is no different than the honor found on the battlefield."

What Colin did not know was that Ronan welcomed the distraction and the strain of the plough. His mind battled with his growing depth of feeling for Shoney and his loyalty to family and clan, and all the while, he strained to find a solution to honor both. Labor alone seemed to keep his thoughts in check. For the first time in his life he felt helpless, powerless. He was falling in love with Shoney.

Hell, there was no point denying it—he fell long ago.

Although he did not know it then, from the first moment he saw her practiced hand take aim at his stag, he gave himself to her, body and soul, but she was the last woman under heaven his father or the clan would accept as his wife. Better she be a MacLean or even an English woman, because then at least she would be a Christian. A pagan who walked the land as the Witch of Dervaig would never be accepted or trusted. They would argue she had bewitched him.

And perhaps she had.

"No," he shook his head, ashamed for doubting once again.

He pictured her clear gray eyes and quick laughter. Her candor, unmatched by any maid he had ever known, and her warrior's spirit combined to create a woman worthy of admiration, yet she was destined to be loathed.

He hoped to find the answers he sought in toil, but when the final row of earth was turned, he released the plough without resolve. Bringing Shoney to Gribun was still unthinkable. He wiped the sweat from his brow. Without the strain of the plough his anger grew unchecked. Fury filled his body, infusing his bones and organs until he felt comprised of rage.

A pagan outcast and the chieftain's son, it was impossible, and the undeniable truth left the taste of bile in his mouth.

He growled as his hands tightened into iron fists.

"A word, Ronan?"

He inhaled, trying to restrain the sickening frenzy swelling outwards from the pit of his stomach. He turned to find Aidan standing behind him. His unbearable rage craved a target. He longed to pummel Aidan to the ground. Without release he would burst like a fiery lightning bolt and then dissipate into thin air. But instead of clobbering an innocent friend, he pushed past Aidan without reply.

Perhaps the icy spring would cool his ire.

Aidan thankfully had the sense not to follow. Soft green earth and hard stone passed under his feet as he hastened to the spring. The stream of water, which was fed from higher sources reaching as far south as Benmore Mountain, rushed over some rocks and fed a narrow but deep pool and then continued down eventually thinning out and trickling into the ocean.

As he approached the pool, he unbuckled his belt and let his plaid drop to the ground. Then he dove into the frigid depths. Icy fingers smothered the fire that threatened to burn him alive. Calm enveloped him as the chill banished all thoughts from his mind. Numb from head to toe, he floated on the surface and stared into the blue heaven above.

"You appear to have put away your fangs."

Ronan sighed and without looking over to where he knew his friend stood, he said, "What do you want, Aidan?"

"Many things actually, but right now there are two which are more pressing than the others."

Ronan shrugged to the blue sky, refusing to let go of his newfound peace. He may as well let Aidan ramble; the water would muffle his complaints.

"The first is you, actually. You, Ronan, are my problem."

"How do you figure that?" Ronan sighed.

"You are hiding something. Do not bother lying. 'Tis plain you are."

Was a moment's peace too much to ask for? Ronan lifted his head and growled, "Aidan, my life is my own, and if you value yours at all, you will move on to whatever else plagues you."

For a moment, it looked as though Aidan was going to press him further, but either the threat or the futility made him stop.

"Anna has refused to let me touch her until I agree to wed the girl. Can you imagine me vowing to love only one woman?"

Ronan rested his head back into the water and continued to float. "God forbid you make an honest woman of one of your many conquests," he said, but Aidan missed his sarcasm.

"Exactly, I knew you would see it my way. Don't get me wrong, Ronan. I would marry Anna if I could. She is a fine lass, but I am cursed with this face, which makes me irresistible to the fairer sex. What I would give some days to be someone else."

"You are pathetic, Aidan," Ronan said as he waved his hand to signal an end to their conversation, but then he hesitated.

"Hold, Aidan. What did you say?"

"I said—what I would give to be someone else."

"That's it," Ronan exclaimed as he hastened from the pool.

"What is it?" Aidan asked.

He ignored the bewildered expression on his friend's face as he belted his plaid in place. "Many thanks, Aidan. You helped me solve a rather difficult problem."

"I do what I can, friend," Aidan chuckled, but as Ronan started to walk away, Aidan grabbed a hold of his arm.

"I helped you with a problem, which now obligates you to share with me its nature," he said.

"Aidan."

"Aye, Ronan."

"I would sooner recommend your character to my sister," he said as he walked away.

"You do not have a sister, and if you did, she would be well acquainted with my character. Ronan," Aidan called after him, "I am a patient man and persistent as you well know. You will tell me."

Ronan could not stop smiling as he passed through the village. It was such an obvious solution and so simple; he could not believe he did not think of it straightaway. For once, Aidan's ramblings proved not to be a complete waste of time. He saw the keep up ahead, and it was all he could do not to break into a run. He did not want to draw attention to himself. He just needed to gather a few effects before he stole away toward the western cliffs where Shoney would be waiting for him.

At long last, he had a plan that would allow her a safe welcome in Gribun. He paused upon entering the courtyard when an image of her glaring at him with willful defiance came unbidden to his mind. He stopped in his tracks and exhaled slowly.

Now all he had to do was convince the most stubborn woman in all of Scotland to see things his way.

Chapter 11

“Absolutely not,” shouted Shoney.

“I do not understand you. You speak of the misery of your isolation. You badger me for weeks about coming to Gribun. I present you with a perfectly sound plan for introducing you to the clan, and you reject it. If I didn’t know better, Shoney, then I would say that you were afraid,” Ronan challenged.

She released a frustrated screech. How dare he act as though she had no reason to be upset. His suggestion was offensive.

“Shoney, no one knows who you are. ‘Tis as though you do not exist. It would be so easy for you to enter into the village with a new name. Many in my clan have never even left Mull. We would claim you were a member of another clan from Skye or Arran.”

“And what would happen when they found out you lied, Ronan?”

“No one would find out,” he snapped.

“Perhaps, you are right. Perhaps you could deceive the people who love and trust you, but I will not. My name is Shoney, daughter of Brethia. I will not betray my mother’s rest by surrendering my name.”

“But you must, Shoney,” Ronan said as he grabbed her arms. “There is no other way.”

“Then you should not have vowed to bring me to the village in the first place,” she replied. “My mother was right. Men make vows they cannot keep.”

“Do not try to make a liar of me. I have broken no vow. I said you would be welcomed into the clan. I made no promises regarding how this could be done.”

He turned on his heel and ducking his head under the doorway he stepped outside, evidently needing to cool off. She had only known Ronan for a season, but one facet of his personality which she had become fully acquainted with in that time was his temper. Not that she was any better, but how could she remain calm under the circumstances? He asked her to give up her life, everything she had ever known, her beliefs. It was too great a price and for what?

What did he intend to gain by bringing her into the village? Why would he go to such lengths? Could it be he pitied her? Her isolation was indeed wretched as was her need to disguise herself as a hideous crone, limping across the moors, scaring children and grown men along the way, but that was her business.

“How dare he pity me.” She swore as she stomped outside to tell him just that.

“You have no right coming here and telling me how I should live my life.” She stood as straight as she could, craning her neck back to meet his gaze and jabbing him in the chest repeatedly to emphasize each word.

“I do not want your pity,” she shouted as she turned on her heel, but she did not get very far before he grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him.

“Pity? Why would I pity you? You move about the world with no responsibility, no one to answer to. You have absolute freedom to go anywhere and be anything,” he yelled.

“Except myself,” she returned.

“God’s blood, Shoney, I cannot change this world to suit you. I would if I could, but I cannot.” His eyes flashed with anger. If she didn’t know better she might have been afraid of the glint visible beneath his heavy brow, but she was not afraid of him, not anymore.

“Those are fancy words, Ronan,” she spat. “So you would change the world for me. Why is that? Showing Christian charity to the friendless outcast? I need no one’s pity.”

“Damn you, Shoney, why do you challenge me still? I am only trying to give you what you want,” he yelled.

“Why?” she raged. “Why do you care where I live? Why would you go to such great lengths, deceiving your family, for me?”

“Because, it is my choice, my will,” he yelled.

“Why?” She shouted again.

“Because *you* are my choice,” he growled as he closed the short distance separating them. He grabbed a hold of her waist and swung her into his arms as his lips closed over hers.

His mouth was hungry and insistent. She could not breathe. She felt as though she was suffocating beneath the crushing pressure of his lips. His fingers dug into her flesh causing her to wince with pain. She pushed against his chest as she struggled to break free, but he was massive and unyielding.

Then almost as suddenly as the kiss began he thrust her back on the ground. She could not speak or move. Shock rendered her mind useless, but then he spoke, and his words sent a chill down her spine.

“Run, Shoney,” he growled. “Go back inside now before I take what has not been offered.”

She turned and fled, slamming the door behind her. Still trying to catch her breath, she pulled back the stag hide to peer out the window. He stood unmoving, staring at her door. Even through the stones, she could feel the animal energy emanating from his body. He raised his hand once as if to knock, but it dropped to his side as he backed away.

She was afraid of what would happen if he stayed, but she could

not bear to watch him go. His last words echoed over and over again in her mind.

Because you are my choice.

A flash of lightening lit the darkening sky and illuminated the shifting storm clouds that unleashed their showers as if by the lightening's command. She watched as he stood unflinching in the rain, staring at her hut from a distance.

Because you are my choice.

Her feet moved of their own accord one in front of the other toward the door. All else but Ronan was forgotten. She thought of nothing but him since they first met, and she had long given up the struggle to pretend she did not desire his touch. His lips and hands awakened a yearning, which intensified every time he was near. She stood in front of the door. Her hand grazed her lips swollen and sore from the force of his kiss. For a moment, fear gripped her mind, but she watched her hand pull back the door as though it belonged to someone else. Her body was in control, and her mind was powerless to stop what was already in motion.

He was her choice.

She stepped outside heedless of the rain and walked toward Ronan. Her eyes met his and did not waver. Her heart pounded in her chest.

"Why are you here?" he whispered.

She did not trust herself to reply. She refused to allow her fear to take hold. Instead, she did what she dreamed. She reached up and ran her hands along the wet, hard ridges of his chest and arms.

"Shoney, do you know what you are asking for?" he said hoarsely.

"Yes. No. Well, not entirely," she smiled as she pressed her lips to a place below his chest.

She moved around him, dragging her fingers across his waist as she walked. Then her eyes were feasting on the broad expanse of his back. Both hands spread wide against his skin. Her lips pressed into him. Her tongue flicked out, licking at the rain drops as they traveled down from his shoulders. He swore and spun around to face her but kept his arms stiff at his sides.

"Shoney, if I touch you, I will not be able to stop."

"That is one vow I insist you keep, because I want you to touch all of me."

His groan filled her ears, quickening her heart, and filling her with wild excitement. He grabbed her, pulling her into his arms. His mouth descended on hers with the full force of his desire, which she hungrily returned with a demand all her own.

His arm came behind her knees as he carried her through the rain and into her hut, his mouth never leaving hers. As soon as her feet touched the ground beside the fire, he seized her tunic and kirtle,

pulling them over her head. His eyes explored her bare flesh, and she blushed in response as she tried to shield herself from his gaze with her hands.

A slow smile curved one side of his mouth as he moved to stand close to her. His hands gently stroked her shoulders.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?" he whispered.

His fingers threaded through her hair as he dipped his head. She felt the tip of his tongue run lightly along the ridges of her mouth, cresting smoothly over her top lip and sweeping down slowly like a whispered caress along the bottom where he lingered.

Instinctively, she opened her mouth in response. His hold on her body tightened as he pressed her closer. She heard herself groan as she wrapped her arms around his neck, returning his kiss with an uncontrollable urgency. A sensation erupted in her core and spread like a breaking wave throughout her body.

But then the unexpected and unwanted happened. A flash of white light crossed her mind's eye, making way for a vision.

She stood in the sand, wearing only her shift. Waves were breaking, drawing close to her feet and pulling away again like a shy child seeking affection. Ahead, Ronan walked toward distant cliffs. She called to him, but he did not stop. She yelled louder, screaming with all her might, but still he did not glance back. In moments, breathes, he was faraway, only a shadow on the horizon. Bending her head in despair, she knew in her heart he was gone forever. At her feet were scattered shards of a broken mirror, but she did not see her reflection in the pieces. The glass held images of her and Ronan together. Collapsing to her knees, she franticly gathered the fragments to safeguard her memories, but suddenly they mirrored only her tear-stained face. She sobbed in anguish, clutching the jagged remains until her palms gushed with blood. She watched as the incoming tide carried the redness away, taking with it love's promise.

The vision faded, but the pain remained, overwhelming Shoney's senses and smothering the flames of Ronan's kiss.

She struggled against his embrace, "Ronan, stop."

He continued to kiss and stroke her skin. "Ronan, I can't. We can't," she cried.

"Ronan," she shouted, her tone forcing him to meet her gaze, "you will hurt me. I have seen it."

He released her and stepped back, dropping his arms at his sides. He panted, his eyes heavy with passion, but when he spoke his voice was gentle.

"Shoney," he said, "you must know I could never hurt you." Grasping her hands, he pressed them flat against his chest where his heart beat. The swiftness of its drumming and the smooth hardness of his skin, hot beneath her fingers, almost made her forget her protest.

“I know your gift is strong,” he said. “You rightly place faith in your visions, but you must also learn to put faith in others, in me.”

Her mind raced. Never had she felt as alive as she did when she was with him, and not just when he held her, touched her, but every time he was near. He brought laughter back to her life. He brought hope and the promise of better days. But the agony she felt in her vision seized her heart with the knowledge of a pain worse than death, the foretelling of a long life spent in solitude having known love’s promise. Her visions never failed her, but was he right? Could she trust him despite the council of her own instincts?

She cupped his face in her hands as she searched his eyes, and she saw nothing but goodness and truth in their amber depths. Desire overshadowed reason. Exhaling slowly, she stood on the tips of her toes as her hand came behind his neck. Then she pulled his lips down to meet hers, sealing her fate with a kiss.

His hands wrapped around her waist as her feet left the ground. He kissed her with slow, relishing motions, drawing groans of pleasure from places deep within she never knew existed. The warmth and strength of his body surrounded her, engulfed her, but it was not enough. She wanted to be closer. She wanted more.

Her hand reached down to his waist as she fumbled with his belt. He grinned at her, “You are my own Saucy Mary.”

She blushed knowing he thought her bold, but then she smiled wickedly, deciding he should know now she would never be obedient and demure. Despite what he believed, she *was* descended of women warriors. She would be brazen when it suited her and prudent when *she* decided it was required—now not being the time for prudence.

She felt his belt give way. Then she slid the extra folds of plaid off his shoulder.

“Put me down,” she said as his plaid fell to the ground.

She stepped back. Her eyes roamed over his large frame. He was everything masculine with hard, defined lines and ridged muscles. His skin was bronzed and smooth, stretched taut over sinew and sprinkled with golden hair. Her eyes were drawn to the puckered skin of his scars. She kissed each one. Two were but inches from being death wounds, and she closed her eyes, thanking the Mother of all for protecting him.

He spread his plaid by the fire like a blanket before he grabbed her fiercely, pulling her beneath him. His body covered hers, but he supported his weight on an elbow.

“Lie on me,” she implored as her arms encircled his neck. “I want to feel all of you.”

“No, Shoney, I would crush you,” he whispered.

Then his lips began to blaze a trail of fire down her throat and

along her shoulders. He kissed and stroked her, igniting her body with hot desire, causing her back to arch as she cried out. Her hands moved over him with an urgency that was pure feeling. Her mind gave over to the intense ache, which permeated every inch of her flesh. Something within her was building, a sweet agony demanding relief.

His weight shifted, and slowly he entered her. She held her breath and everything stood still as she took more and more of him. At first, a flash of hot pain coursed through her, but it subsided as quickly as it came, and soon their bodies moved in unison. Her nails raked his back as she tried to press him closer. Need surged through her as wild abandon took hold, guiding her actions. It was carnal and timeless and as powerful and natural as the sea. Throbbing heat ignited her core, pulsing and craving release. The ache intensified as blissful terror flooded her senses and her body erupted. She cried out, trembling and quaking, swept away on rapturous waves. Through a euphoric haze she heard his cry and felt him shudder around her. She clung to him, burying her face in his neck, thinking she would be lost forever.

Try as he might, Ronan could not catch his breath. He had known the sweet pleasure of women before, but even in his wildest dreams, he never imagined the feral abandon of Shoney. She showed no restraint, holding nothing back, and he had lost himself to the tremendous hunger she stirred, making him feel crazed with desire. He gazed in awe at the small but powerful woman trying to catch her breath in his embrace.

“Are you alright?” he whispered.

She threw her arms around his neck, which he decided was answer enough. Finding her skin damp from their exertions, he dragged his fingers over the length of her creamy legs and curved hips. Although she was small, her body was not overly lean. It was soft in all the right places. His hand caressed the curve of her stomach and the gentle flare of her hips. Her thighs were strong but also supple to the touch. His hands suddenly became furtive as he stroked her, his desire renewed. He needed her again. He groaned as he felt her teeth bite into his shoulder.

“Ronan,” he heard her whisper, “make it happen again.”

He stretched over her, pressing into her heat, but then he froze. Something or someone was outside. He glanced down; confusion clouded her eyes. She started to speak, but he covered her mouth with his hand and motioned for her to be silent. Her confusion quickly turned to fear as he stood and took hold of his sword. He slowly edged toward the door, glancing back to offer reassurance, but she was not the shivering mass hiding under his plaid he expected. She stood in all her naked glory with her sword raised at the ready. He scowled and

motioned for her to get down, but she rolled her eyes and emphatically pointed toward the door, clearly chastising him for turning away from possible danger.

He jerked around as the door slammed open and a man bounded inside, hollering and wildly swinging his sword. Ronan jumped back in time to escape the slicing force of the blade and straightaway recognized the madman.

"Aidan?" he said.

Aidan stood in the center of the hut still bellowing and stabbing at the air, but he did not attack nor did he seem to notice no one attacked him. He was lost to panic.

"Aidan," Ronan called again, but still his friend did not hear.

He moved behind him, ducking the swing of his blade. Seizing a hold of Aidan's hand, he kept the sword aloft and spun him around.

"Aidan," Ronan said. "'Tis me. 'Tis Ronan."

Aidan panted, and his eyes darted everywhere, but he did not appear to see anything. Ronan grabbed a mug of ale from the table and tossed the contents, hitting Aidan square in the face. He sputtered and wiped his eyes. When they opened Ronan could see they were lucid but still afraid.

"Ronan," he gasped. "Thank the Lord you are alive."

He headed toward the door. "Why do you stand there, Ronan? Let us flee."

"Aidan, you need to calm down," he said as he looked around for Shoney. He was relieved to see her peeking out from behind the far side of her table.

"God rot calming down, Ronan," he growled. "We are standing in the house of the Witch of Dervaig. I do not want to linger a moment longer. Come away," he implored.

"Aidan, you must listen to me."

"No, Ronan," he shouted. "You listen to me. The hag has put some spell on you. You must come with me now before she comes back, and we are both lost to her witchcraft."

"Aidan, there is no witch," Ronan said.

"Damn it, Ronan, you are the stronger between us, but I feel I could best you right now. I am leaving, and by Christ's blood, you are coming with me. Will you go, or need I beat the breath out of you?" he yelled.

Terror was clearly reclaiming control over his friend. Without further hesitation, Ronan pulled back and hit Aidan square in the jaw. He crumbled unconscious to the ground.

Chapter 12

"Ronan," Shoney exclaimed as she sprang from her hiding place. "Why did you hit him?"

"Not even at the onset of battle have I witnessed such fear. He was not his rational self. I just saved him from doing something crazy like picking a fight with me."

Despite the thin line of blood trickling from the corner of Aidan's mouth, he looked peaceful.

"Aye, he needs a short rest to calm his nerves," he said.

"It was me, wasn't it?" Shoney cried. "Mother of all, I never imagined I scared you all that much."

Ronan shrugged, "It has tested my courage more than once to come here, but I am no longer afraid. It will be the same for Aidan when he is able to listen."

"You mean when he is no longer rendered unconscious by the might of your fist," she scoffed.

"Precisely," he grinned.

"Well, the least I can do, since this is all my fault, is clean his wound and help the headache he is sure to have."

After quickly dressing, Shoney strode to her table and set a mixture of dried chamomile and nettle to brew.

"This tea will lessen the pain," she told Ronan before gathering water, a clean rag, and a salve made with ivy. Kneeling by the invalid, she gazed at him in wonder. So many moons had waned and grown full, and all the while she never had a man in her hut, and now it was overcrowded with the bulk of two large men.

She brushed the black curls away from his face and gasped. He was no stranger, not really.

"'Tis the man from my vision, Ronan," she said.

"His name is Aidan. He is my best and oldest friend, a valiant warrior, and you saved his life, Shoney."

She smiled at his praise then set to work cleaning Aidan's face. Patting the cloth into his chin, she soaked up the blood trickling from a small cut inside his mouth where his teeth had bit into his lip. Then she smeared a dab of salve on the wound to ease the pain and keep the swelling down.

She studied his face. He was beautiful.

His lips were full and his jaw chiseled. His thick coal black lashes were long, fanning across his cheeks. She traced the smooth contours that defined his face as she stared mesmerized. His features were almost too fine for a man, more suited to a woman, but framed by his

wild black curls and broad muscled shoulders and neck, his virility was impossible to ignore.

"So you too are not immune to Aidan's pretty face."

Her eyes snapped toward Ronan, and she blushed, realizing he had caught her admiring another man.

"He is beautiful, Ronan, but too feminine for my tastes. I much prefer your rugged good looks."

"Given I am one of two men you have now seen up close, I will not let your compliment go to my head," he grinned.

Aidan's sweeping lashes flickered, grabbing her attention.

"He wakes, Ronan," she whispered.

Slowly Aidan's eyes opened. She gently soothed his brow and murmured gentle assurances that nothing was going to harm him. Then a slight smile curved his lips.

"Shoney," he whispered, "'tis you."

She jerked back. "You know me?" she asked.

"You were the angel who almost took me to heaven when I died on the moors," he murmured and winced as his hand flew to his head. "But then Ronan showed up with his ugly mug and scared you away. Sweet Jesus, my head hurts."

"Ronan, the tea please," she said.

Ronan's hand rested on her shoulder as he leaned over to hand Aidan the steaming mug.

"And there he is now, so I know I'm not dead, because St. Peter would never let that blackguard past the gates."

"Hello, Aidan," Ronan said.

Aidan looked at her and then at Ronan and then back at her. "Who are you?" he said. "Where am I?"

His gaze skimmed over her furnishings but settled on her door. She could tell the very instant he knew where he was by the fear flooding his eyes.

"Aidan, I do not want to have to punch you again so do not panic," Ronan said.

"I am lying in the hut of the Witch of Dervaig, and you want me not to panic." Then his voice lowered to a whisper. "Where is she?" he cringed.

"There is no Witch of Dervaig, Aidan. There is only Shoney."

Aidan stared at her in disbelief. "You live here?"

Shoney nodded, walking to the Witch's cloak, which she pulled from its peg. She had to expose the Witch for what she really was, nothing more than a clever disguise. Sweeping the folds over her shoulders, she covered her head and assumed the position. Peering out from beneath the hood, she saw terror and revulsion pass over Aidan's face.

"'Tis only me, Aidan," she said as she tugged the cloak off her shoulders. "'Tis I whom you have seen on the moors and in the forest, but I am no witch."

"If you are not a witch, then how do I know your face when we've not met until now?" he demanded. "How do I have your name on my lips?"

"Calm down, Aidan. 'Tis simple enough to explain. I have visions. I see things in my mind. Sometimes I see that which has already past or that which has yet to be. Our minds were bound together for an instant. I saw you bleeding on the moors, and you felt my comfort. It was my vision, in fact, which led Ronan to you."

"You have visions, and you can see ahead to a time that has not yet past, but you are not a witch?" he scoffed.

"No," she said. "I have no magic—'tis a gift."

"A gift?" he said, his tone mocking.

"Aye, a gift, and might I remind you 'tis a gift that saved your life," she snapped.

Ronan stepped in front of her, shielding her from his friend. "She is a good woman, Aidan. We have always trusted each other. I need you to trust me now." She shivered as his voiced grew menacing. "And know this, Aidan. She is under my protection."

"How can you believe she is not the witch? Her story holds no weight. In appearance she is a lass of no more than eighteen years, but the Witch of Dervaig has been haunting our island for more than a century."

"All of the women of my descent have worn the cloak to protect ourselves from the likes of you," she asserted from behind Ronan's back.

"And you believed this farcical tale, Ronan," Aidan scoffed. "She is lying. Beautiful enticements meant to blind foolhardy men like you conceal her hideous face and crooked form. Perhaps, Ronan, we cannot see what she really is," he implored.

That was the final straw. She charged around Ronan. "And what am I?" she shouted. "Choose you words wisely, fiend, or you will feel the sharp end of my blade."

She moved to grab her weapon when Ronan shoved her behind him once more. "Enough of this woman warrior nonsense, Shoney. Can't you see he is five of you?" Ronan snapped.

"I don't care," she yelled. "He called me a liar."

"Did she really just challenge me to a battle of arms?" Aidan chuckled.

Shoney shrieked with fury. How dare he laugh at her, and how dare Ronan scold her as though she were a child.

"I have had enough Scotsmen for one evening." She stomped to the

door, and she threw it open. “Both of you get out, now.”

“She is a little hot tempered,” Ronan explained to Aidan.

“I reckon so,” Aidan replied.

“Do you think if she were the Witch she would stomp around, demanding to fight you with steel?” Ronan asked.

Shoney could not believe her ears. Ronan mocked her, and they were both ignoring her command to leave. She was going to tell them exactly where they could shove their disregard when she stopped short. Ronan and Aidan’s eyes were locked in silent combat. It was an intense exchange where she guessed Aidan was assessing the truth of Ronan’s words, and Ronan was judging his friend’s faith. Her heart drummed in her ears as their standoff continued, seeming to last for an eternity.

Then without warning, Aidan crossed the room and stood before her. He grabbed her forearms and lifted her in the air until they were face to face. His eyes bore into hers. She knew he looked for some sign of wickedness, but she was furious and would not pretend to be the dulcet lamb just to satisfy his suspicion. She returned his gaze with what she hoped was a menacing scowl, but to her annoyance, Aidan’s lips spread into a wide grin as he put her feet on the ground and turned to Ronan.

He clamped his hand on Ronan’s shoulder. “So you have at last lost your heart to love. Not that I can blame him,” he said looking back at Shoney, “On my life, I would swear you were the most comely lass on Mull.”

“He should know, Shoney. He is always looking,” Ronan grinned.

“Pardon me for interrupting,” she snapped, “but did either of you pigheaded louts hear that I just threw you out of my home.”

The two men smiled at her. Then moving her chairs by the fire, they sat down. “Mother of all,” she screamed as she stormed outside despite the darkness, slamming the door behind her.

“You are heading down an impassable road, Ronan,” Aidan said as his eyes darted around the hut. Ronan could tell his friend was still not at ease in Shoney’s home, but he could not blame him. It took more than one visit for him to stop watching over his shoulder for the legendary witch to appear.

“Difficult, I will admit but not impossible,” Ronan replied.

“I am assuming when she stormed out of here just now swearing to the Mother of all that she did not mean the Blessed Mother,” Aidan said dryly as he casually pointed to the carvings of gods lining the back of Shoney’s table.

“What of it,” Ronan grunted.

“Well, ‘tis just that she may not be a witch—a fact no one will

believe—but she is an idolater."

Ronan did not reply. As far as he was concerned Shoney's beliefs were none of Aidan's business.

"Perhaps it is not as bad as I fear," Aidan began to laugh as he continued, "I mean, 'tis not as though she paints her body and dances around naked, making offerings to the gods."

The memory of Shoney with the beautiful blue paintings of animals lining her graceful limbs came to Ronan's mind. The sweet sound of her song invaded his ears, and the memory of her swaying hips as she moved to the music of her prayer made him ache for her.

"Do you have a point," Ronan snapped.

"God's blood, you mean she does? Ronan, Father Colin will defame her name to anyone who will listen, which, incidentally, will be everyone. If you even try to introduce her into the clan, your father will never forgive you. I'd wager he and the council would banish you for certain."

Ronan refused to hear Aidan's warning. Shoney was the finest woman, endowed with every quality any maid might hope to possess. Not to mention, she had the will and courage of a warrior. Perhaps she did have a slight temper and no understanding of the limitations of her stature, but all anyone had to do was meet her and they would know her goodness.

"Ronan, you may choose to ignore me, but you must know I am right."

"I will find a way, and I will call on your aid if need be," Ronan said. Then he decided it was time to change the subject. "How did you know I was here?" he asked.

"When you did not return last night, I set out to find you. Ever since you started making a habit of disappearing, I have scoured the island for you. This evening, I realized there was only one place left to look. So I headed west. I don't mind admitting I almost pissed myself from fear as I approached her hut, but then I found your sporran outside."

"And you came charging in here to rescue me," Ronan interrupted, "despite being demented with fear. I am impressed, Aidan."

"That isn't entirely true. I actually stood outside for more than an hour working up the courage to go in after you," he grinned.

"'Tis reassuring to know I can depend on you regardless of the danger," Ronan smirked. "Now, listen here. Before I go after her and cool her temper, I must know whether or not you are still afraid?"

"If that is your way of asking me if I believe in her, then I will tell you the truth. I witnessed in her eyes a candor I seldom see in the fairer sex. I do not doubt she is who she says. What I doubt, however, is whether any good may come from what you've both started."

Ronan nodded. He knew there was weight to Aidan's caution, but he could also not help feeling hopeful. If Aidan could meet Shoney and accept the undeniable truth, then it stood to reason so would his family and in time the whole clan. Perhaps, Shoney's merit alone was enough to erase past prejudices. Then there would be no need for disguises or deceptions. She could be herself for the first time.

He spotted her straightaway despite the darkness, having ventured only as far as the Dervaig Stones. He walked up behind her, and, moving aside her soft waves, he pressed his lips to her neck, but she jumped away as though dodging a hot poker.

"Keep away from me, Ronan. I have had enough of you for one night."

He could not help but grin as he said, "I could never have my fill of you." Did she blush or was that fury coloring her cheeks? It was too dark to be sure.

"I know you are angry because I did not allow you to challenge Aidan to a fight, but you cannot deny his size and might," Ronan said.

She whirled around, surprising him as she stalked back to where he stood and stuck her finger in his face. "First, you put far too much faith in size, which is not surprising since you are as big as a giant, but being small also has its advantages in combat. You should not discount any opponent by appearance lest you find yourself surprised one day. Second, I am not angry because I did not have your so-called permission to challenge Aidan. My fury can be blamed on your treatment of me as though I were your child and on your complete disregard for my wishes."

"You wished us take our leave in a most inhospitable manner despite the tenuous peace I was trying to keep. I could also claim injury by your treatment, but I choose not to focus on the latter half of the evening. I would rather remember the earlier moments."

That time she unmistakably blushed. He slid his arm around her waist and pressed a kiss to her lips.

"Is all forgiven then?" he asked.

"I suppose your claim to injury is as valid as my own, but all that transpired here tonight changes nothing. I will not relinquish my name or my past, Ronan."

"You may not have to," he said as he nodded toward her door. "You have another ally, Shoney," he smiled.

"Are you certain he is trustworthy?" she asked.

"I would wager my life on it," Ronan asserted. "And if Aidan can see the truth, then why not the rest of my family."

Aidan drew their attention back to the door as it swung open, and he stepped into the night. Striding over to Shoney, he handed her a plump thistle.

“I found this in his sporran,” he smiled. “I am assuming it was meant for you.”

Shoney brought the flower to her nose and inhaled its scent. She was overwhelmed by the night’s events. She closed her eyes and remembered Ronan’s hands on her skin as she surged with desire. Her eyes flew open, and she cleared her throat hopeful neither man had guessed her thoughts, but when she met Ronan’s gaze, his eyes mirrored the need churning within her depths.

He closed the distance between them and lifted her off the ground and into his arms. She instantly forgot they were not alone as she circled her arms around his neck and placed a slow kiss to his lips.

“I do hate to be the bucket of cold water,” Aidan began, “but we must go, Ronan. We will be missed if not on the training fields by sunrise, and I at the very least must get some rest tonight.”

“He is right, Shoney. I have to go, but watch for my return, for I will be gone mere moments. I have not the will to stay away,” he grinned.

She buried her face into his neck. Fear bristled up her spine, causing her to shiver as the weight of his absence settled over her, and her vision of being rejected and cast aside flooded her mind.

“Do not fear, Shoney. I will return. I promise you,” he whispered.

“Do you know how often I have stood here looking toward Gribun?” she began. “Never at this time, of course—too dark,” she smiled, “but I stood, wondering who was out there.” She threaded her fingers into his hair as her lips lingered a breath away from his. “Never did I imagine such a man as you, Ronan. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for seeing me for who I really am.”

“Since you did once refer to me and my clan as enemy invaders who destroyed your people and your way of life, I believe we have both put old prejudices to rest,” he grinned. “So you also have my thanks.”

He lifted her high in the air and spun her around, and she laughed despite her sadness. Then she stood in the night, watching their departure and remained even when she could no longer see his outline through the shadowy darkness. She prayed for his swift return and for her heart to be strong. But as she closed the door and stared at her empty quarters, she longed for the sound of his laughter and the feel of his strong hands on her body. Climbing under her blanket, she imagined she slept enclosed in his arms.

When morning came, she busied herself with chores. Having used the last of the ivy salve on Aidan’s lip, she set to replenishing her supply. Then she collected eggs from her chickens’ favorite laying spots, finding twice as many as the day before. Summer arrived, and she could not contain her excitement. Her life was a flood of

possibilities now more than ever. Ronan could be at that very moment making his way to her hut. She glanced down at her stained tunic and grimy hands and decided with that in mind she needed a bath.

At nightfall, she made porridge and baked two bannock loaves over the fire lest Ronan return hungry for supper. Her gaze flitted back and forth between the warm bannock and the closed door. As her stomach growled, she willed the door to open and Ronan to emerge from the night. But the door did not budge, and she ate in silence.

The evening slipped away and finally she surrendered to fatigue. Lying on her pallet, she glanced at the second loaf uneaten on the table, but it mocked her. She scowled, turning away only to be taunted by the closed door. She screeched with frustration. Her patience was running out, but surely he would come on the morrow.

In the morning, she awoke and scanned her quarters, hoping he waited for her to rise, but her hut was empty. She rose and grabbed the bread off the table and gnawed off a bite as tension seized her body, stiffening her shoulders.

She stopped chewing and closed her eyes and released a slow breath. She could not pass the hours while apprehension rattled her nerves. As she finished the last crusty bite of bread she decided to try her hand at fishing to occupy her mind with something other than penetrating amber eyes. But as the day drew to a close, and she walked back into her hut, she cursed once again.

“Well, at least the fishing was successful,” she said dryly as she emptied her satchel on the table.

Her nets were drying, spread out on rocks set back from the lapping waves, and a pile of herring glistened on her table, but she did not see their scaly bodies. All she saw was Ronan.

As day gave way to night, she submitted to her weakness and allowed him to take over her every thought. And for the next few days, she did as she was bid: She watched for him. Gazing out over the moors,
she looked for his coming, but each night, she turned back inside alone.

On the seventh morning, she awoke with clenched fists. Had it all been a lie? She did not know, but she would be damned if she waited around any longer to find out. Casting her blanket aside, she grabbed the cloak of the Witch of Dervaig. She refused to watch for his return another day. If he would not come to her, then she would go to him and hear from his own lips why he stayed away. Sweeping the cloak over her shoulders, she stepped onto the moors, limping and shuffling toward Gribun. She may not be a witch, but he was sorely mistaken if he thought he could use her and not fear the consequences. No, Ronan would not be punished with magic, but if he cast her aside as her

vision foretold, she would make sure he suffered.

Chapter 13

“’Tis the Witch,” a chorus of children screamed as they raced past Ronan and Aidan.

“God’s blood,” Ronan swore as he grabbed hold of a squirmy little boy and lifted him high in the air.

“Where is she? Where is the Witch?” He demanded, but the boy could only stare at him with pale, terror-stricken eyes. Apparently, he was as scared of an angry, oversized warrior as he was by the Witch of Dervaig, but Ronan had no patience for the boy’s fear. He gave him a little shake and shouted, “Tell me where you saw the Witch, lad, or I’ll take a switch to your hide.”

“Ronan,” Aidan snapped. “For pity’s sake, give the lad to me.”

Ronan handed over the dirty faced whelp who was now screaming and flailing his skinny legs. Aidan put the boy’s feet on the ground and crouched down until their eyes met. “Alright then, lad, I saved you from the big, scary giant. Now, tell me where you saw the Witch.” The boy cupped his mouth as he whispered into Aidan’s ear. “Good lad,” Aidan smiled. Then he stood and gave the boy a swat on his rear end. “Now get going. The giant’s stomach rumbled, and you’d make him a tidy snack.” The boy’s eyes nigh bulged out of his head before he tore down the lane as if the devil himself gave chase.

“You’d like to think you are the nice one,” Ronan said dryly, “but you are a rotter same as me. Now out with it. Where did he see her?”

“Heading into the north end of the forest,” Aidan said.

“On the outskirts of Gribun?”

Ronan wondered why she would take a path so close to the village. Then the answer came to him.

“She wanted to be seen,” he said. “She is vexed with me.”

“Well, it has been a full week, and you did vow to return sooner,” Aidan replied. “Women don’t like waiting, nor do they take kindly to broken promises.”

“I do not need reminding,” he snapped. “I am painfully aware of how many days have passed, but I have had meetings and training. Hellfire, Aidan, we are on the brink of war.”

Aidan threw his hand up. “’Tis not me you need to be telling all this to—‘tis Shoney. With that in mind, Ronan, should we not go find her?”

“Aye,” he grumbled, “and swiftly. If she loses her temper, there is no telling what she might do. It will be hard enough to convince the clan she is just a normal girl. The last thing I need is for her the challenge a passing warrior to a duel.”

Aidan burst into laughter.

"What is so funny," Ronan growled.

"I'm sorry, my friend, I did not mean to make light of the matter, but I imagined Shoney confronting big, harry Dugald with sword at the ready, and picturing Dugald's reaction just did me in."

Ronan could not help but smile. "I have found a spirited lass," he chuckled.

"That is one way to describe her," Aidan grinned.

"Something tells me we are about to witness just how spirited she can be," Ronan said with a grimace as he headed toward the forest.

Upon entering the wood, he wondered how long it would take to find her, but he did not have to wonder long. Within moments, the Witch appeared from behind a tight cluster of trees and stormed toward them.

"Saints preserve us," Aidan cringed as the figure charged.

Ronan had to admit Shoney was a chilling sight. She was fully enclosed within the folds of the tattered cloak of the Witch, but she had abandoned the usual limp and shuffle. If he didn't know better, then he would have sworn the Witch of Dervaig had sprouted wings. But just as she was upon them, she flung her hood back and revealed her waves of golden hair and her fierce steel eyes.

"Sweet Jesus, thank you," he heard Aidan mutter at his side.

She stood unflinching with legs apart and hands on her hips. Her head barely reached his chest. He had three times the breadth of shoulder, but still she brandished her might like a chieftain.

"How dare you cast me aside, Ronan MacKinnon," she said as she jabbed him in the chest with her pointed finger. "And to think, I trusted you. I was a fool to dismiss my vision," she shouted.

He grabbed her wrist and turned her hand over and kissed her palm, but she yanked her hand away and cradled it as though he had stung her.

"Let me begin by clarifying that I have not cast you aside as you put it. I demand to know what gave you that idea," he said.

"You told me to watch for you," she shouted. "You told me you could not bear to stay away. You led me to believe your return was imminent not in a week's time."

"Ronan, she does have a point," Aidan said.

Ronan glared at him before turning back to Shoney. "I have my duties, Shoney. I have been very clear about this from the beginning. Do you know how much I risk speaking to you right now so close to the village?"

Aidan once again interrupted, "Shoney, he also makes a good point."

"Aidan," both Ronan and Shoney shouted in unison, "shut up."

He raised his hands in surrender. “Fair enough,” he said, backing away. “I will keep watch while you both work through this mess alone.”

Ronan waited until Aidan was out of ear shot. Then he turned back to Shoney. “I don’t want to fight, Shoney.”

And he meant it. Seven days had seemed like an eternity, and now that she was finally standing in front of him, the last thing he wanted to do was argue. Looking from side to side, ensuring they were indeed alone, he said, “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

“Are you taking me to the village?” Shoney demanded. “Because that is the only place I want you to take me right now. I cannot stomach anymore deception or broken promises. Let us take our chances with the truth.”

“Nay, Shoney,” his hand ran through his hair in agitation, but he worked to keep his temper at bay. “You know I cannot. My people are already anxious about the threat of war. Their actions will be guided by fear. They will think you are a bad omen.”

“That is absurd,” she scoffed.

“That is the truth, Shoney,” he sighed. “We must wait until after the war. I am sorry, lass. Now, enough of this,” he beseeched. “Please, come with me.”

He edged up the wooded slope, staying low to the ground. He glanced behind to see how she progressed, but she stood unmoving at the hill’s base.

“Are you coming?” he called.

“Ronan, I know every tree in this forest. There is naught for you to show me except a little understanding.”

He walked back down the slope and stood before her. Sweeping the Witch’s cloak off her shoulders, he stuffed it into his sporran. Her face was crimson with anger, and her gray eyes blazed, reminding him of a steel blade catching the sun’s fire.

“I have missed you every minute of every hour. I swear to you, Shoney. If I could have stolen away, then I would have, but I will not act rashly. There is far too much at stake to be reckless.”

He watched as a series of emotions seemed to dance across her face. Then her head hung for a moment as she stared at the ground. When her gaze met his again, he could see emotion still churning behind her stormy eyes.

“’Tis not easy being the one who is found wanting, Ronan, and although you say ‘tis just a matter of time, I feel in my heart that we want the impossible.”

He started to interrupt her, to deny her claim, but her hand silenced him.

“Please, Ronan, allow me to finish. I am proud of who I am. I am

proud of the woman who mothered me. I do not wish to dishonor myself any further with this deception."

"You speak against deception," he interrupted, "but, Shoney, you and your family have been deceiving my clan for well over a century. Or need I remind you of the invented and fearsome Witch of Dervaig."

"But that has been a necessary lie," she snapped, "for our protection, our safe passage through this land."

"Your protection is my one and only motivation for deceiving my family," he replied.

"I believe nothing will be different when the war is over," she said. Her shoulders stooped with dejection, and her eyes clouded with a shadow of pain. "'Tis impossible, Ronan," she whispered.

"No, Shoney. Do not despair. I told you I will find a way."

"I remember the madness that claimed poor Aidan when he thought he faced the real Witch. I will only ever be despised and feared."

"But, Shoney, that same man greeted you with a smile just moments ago and even as we speak is keeping watch to ensure our secret is safe. If Aidan can be convinced then why not the rest of the MacKinnons," he paused, taking a deep breath and then exhaled loudly, "but not now, not when war is so close at hand."

She stared off into the distance for a moment, her face a mask guarding her thoughts. After a time she said, "You know the temper of your people far better than I, but I can make no promises to remain contented until after the war. I do not say this to be obstinate. I just do not want to make a promise I cannot be sure to keep". She reached out and took his hand. "I do owe you an apology, however."

"Whatever for?" he asked.

"I have been selfish today, drawing you into the woods. I allowed my temper to once again guide my actions."

"A trait which you and I share," he smiled.

"And yet, you came despite the personal risk. Why?" she whispered.

"Is it not obvious, Shoney," he said. Then he pulled her to him and grazed his fingers across her cheek.

"I love you," he whispered as his lips took claim over her mouth, kissing her deeply. When he pulled away, a wide smile lit her face. She laughed and started running up the hill.

"Where are you taking me," she called down to where he stood.

He stared for a moment in awe of her strange beauty. Then he dashed up the hill, catching her hand. They ascended the remainder of the slope together.

"Is this safe, Ronan? Should I not return home now?"

"There is naught to worry about. Aidan will alert me if anyone ventures close."

Her wide eyes were lit with pleasure, causing him to chuckle as he considered how just moments before her eyes had flashed hot with anger. He was once again the hero. Never would he have imagined a girl who could cause him so much agitation and at the same time so much pleasure. Her sharp tongue and stubborn ways pushed his patience to the limit, but her resilient spirit and fervor for life were intoxicating.

As they crested the top of the hill, he paused to take in the idyllic scene below. From all sides, the forest gradually sloped down and the trees thinned out as land met the waters of a small pond where dozens of small, black ducks swam.

"I saw them flying overhead in the direction of the forest this morning, and I knew they would come here to swim."

"'Tis beautiful, Ronan. If only we could forget that a world existed beyond this splendor." She chuckled as she continued, but her smile did not reach her eyes. "However, even Puffins do not allow the mind to forget the trials of life."

He laughed, wrapping his arms around her. "Be patient, Shoney, and do not doubt me. I promise you I will find a way," he vowed.

"When can we be together again?"

"Tomorrow," he said. "Meet me under the lone tree that sits in the valley west of here."

"I know the place, but do we not risk discovery?"

"Aidan will ensure our privacy. Meet me there in the morning. I will bring food and drink, and I promise you I will not leave your side until the next day."

"No more promises, Ronan. If you do not make them, then they cannot be broken," she frowned.

"Have faith in me, my love. This is one promise I know I can keep."

Chapter 14

Shoney stretched her arms out, fanning her fingers wide. The leaves of the Hazel tree above were abundant and obscured the blue sky with green finery. She smiled at the shadows of leaves that littered her arms. Then her gaze returned to the man asleep with his head in her lap. A leaf shadow danced on his cheek, and she traced its outline with her finger, causing him to stir. He smiled but did not open his eyes.

"Your slightest touch has the power to soothe me to sleep like a babe," he smiled.

Then he sprung to life and pulled her beneath him. "Or fill me with a fire that pulls me from my dreams," his husky voice whispered.

She felt the muscled weight of him cover her as she breathed his scent and reveled in his strength. The day so far had been wonderful. She could not remember having ever been so content.

"I did not, my love, but graze your cheek," she said.

Her finger traced a path down his neck as he lowered his lips to hers. She had expected his kiss to hold the demand of his body, but his lips only brushed hers, and then he froze as darkness crept into his eyes. She sensed he was searching for something. He seemed to be desperately trying to see into her mind, but what he sought, she could not say.

Could he still even now doubt she was real?

"You are indeed a sorceress," his rasped, "for you muddle my mind and plague my body with insatiable need."

She was breathless and lightheaded. "I am only a woman, Ronan. And need I remind you that it was you who taught me how it was between a man and a woman.

His eyes brightened as a slow smile curved his lips. "I believe 'tis time for another lesson."

He covered her mouth with the warmth of his kiss, and she finally felt the full force of his desire. His tongue stroked a languishing path through her mouth as his fingers dug into her hair. He pulled down, forcing her back to arch. His hands swept waves of heat over her body as he caressed her breasts through the fibers of her tunic, causing her to moan with pleasure.

Again he held himself aloft, resting his weight on his elbow. He thought his size too much for her small frame to handle, but she wanted to feel all of him. She tore at the skin of his back as she pressed their bodies closer. Then she seized his arm and pulled until it finally gave way, and his full weight slid over her. He groaned and his kiss intensified as if his last restraint, the last of his self-control were

gone. His kiss stunned her by its overpowering force. His mouth and hands devoured her, and she returned every hunger-infused stroke as her fingers threaded through his thick hair, urging his tongue to plunge deeper. He yanked her tunic and kirtle until they were bunched at her waist. The warmth of the sun mingled with the heat of his hands, branding a pathway down her stomach to her thighs.

She trembled at his touch. Sensation overwhelmed her. He stroked her warmth, igniting fiery ripples of pleasure, which tantalized as she melted beneath his caress. Her hands rushed over his back, and she groaned as she felt his strength and heat.

"Ronan, I want you now," she begged.

Suddenly, he swore and pulled away. Her eyes flew open, and she started to voice her protest, but her words were lost in folds of fabric as he pulled her tunic over her head.

He quickly unbelted his plaid, and then once more, his body covered hers. She shoved against his chest, and he rolled over. She followed, straddling his bronzed torso. Her lips and tongue enticed and tormented as she traveled across his rugged physique. His ragged breathing and groans of pleasure drove her wild as she explored and reveled in the salty taste of his skin and the allure of his musky scent. Then he swept her gently onto her back, and she strained to open herself to him. Her body ached to be filled, but he did not take his pleasure swiftly. He slowly pressed into her. With deliberate constraint he drove her to writhe beneath him. The exquisite ache intensified. It was too much to bear. She lifted her hips, pleading for relief as her body throbbed with need. Finally, he took her with the force she craved.

She was a windswept wave, charging toward shore. And as he drove deeper and deeper, the storm inside her body raged on until she suddenly seized, erupting with sensation that spread throughout her being like the broad fingers of lightening slashing through the sky.

But her cries of pleasure were silenced by the gentle din of an unwanted intruder.

The tolling of a bell came floating over the moors, cutting through her euphoria. With the peal of each passing chime, the reverberations of ecstasy coursing through her body were replaced with shutters of foreboding. The sound was so distant—barely audible—but its obtrusive meaning blasted in her ears.

Then it was no longer the sound of a bell at all but a chorus of voices chanting *Witch, Witch, Witch* in her mind as she was lost to a vision.

Ronan was once again walking away from her on the beach, only this time he did look back. With a cruel sneer twisting his features, he laughed and called her a whore.

She did not know herself as she succumbed to the doubt her vision implanted in her heart. She beat her fists against his chest and cried out, “You’re a bastard—a liar.”

“Shoney, what is the matter with you?” He lay atop her, pinning her arms above her head. Still, she continued to thrash and scream.

“Shoney, you are crazed. I cannot do this right now. Do you not hear the alarm?” he exclaimed as he jumped to his feet, looking in the direction of the village.

On her hands and knees, she grappled with her clothing. “The only alarm I hear is the one in my heart telling me you have no honor.”

“You speak of honor when my village may be under attack, and yet you would delay my return.”

“There will always be a bell or a council meeting,” she shouted. She felt her eyes fill with tears, but she did not care. She was tired of being tossed aside. She was tired of hiding.

“You are ashamed of me. If you truly loved me, you would fight for me, for us.”

“You doubt me even now?” he grabbed hold of her arms. “You will be my wife. You will bear my children.”

“You are lying to me and to yourself,” she cried.

“I should not have to keep defending my life to you. You know I have my duty.” She winced as his grip on her arms tightened. “What more do you want from me?” he scowled.

She reached for his hands and clutched them tightly. “I want you to aid your family and your people. I want you to ride hard and answer the call of the alarm, but take me with you.” She began to pull him in the direction of the village. “Come Ronan. Let us ride now, together.”

“No, Shoney, ‘tis too risky. The village may be under attack.”

“In case of an attack is why you should bring me now. Ronan, I can fight—you know my skill with a
bow.” But before she could finish her defense he interrupted.

“Never, Shoney. You will never fight. Perhaps you are right and at one time women were indeed warriors, but that time has long since passed.” He bent his head and brushed her lips with a kiss. Then he started toward his mount.

“Ronan,” she called after him.

He turned and faced her with fire in his eyes and said, “Enough, Shoney. I must go.” But she ran ahead and stood in front of him, blocking his path.

“I am a healer. Ronan, please take me with you. You will need my skill if any within your clan has suffered injury.” Her voice was pleading, and she hated the sound of it, but she was desperate to be included. He gave her no quarter as he grabbed her shoulders and lifted her out of the way.

“The bell rings, and I must answer its call. I will return to you this night, to this very place.” He cupped her face and kissed her slowly. “I will not fail you,” he whispered.

Then he was gone.

Chapter 15

From a distance, Ronan could see the village was not under attack. People were walking to and fro, going about their usual business. He even saw children at play. Everyone seemed oblivious to the constant clanging. Never had the bell been rung for so long. Urging his mount forward, he galloped into the village and did not wait for his horse to stop before he jumped down. He called out to all who stood by, "What danger is there?" but no one replied.

"What is the matter with everyone," he growled. "Why does the bell toll?"

Argyle approached him and rested his frail hand on Ronan's shoulder. "'Tis your mother, lad. She has taken ill with a mysterious malady. She is weak like one who has been sick for weeks or months."

"You must be mistaken, Argyle, for I saw my mother two evenings past, and she was quite well."

"I have seen her with my own eyes, lad. She is as I say. Morna does not know what ails her nor does Father Colin. She has been bled, but her condition seems grave."

He could not believe his mother was as ill as Argyle described. Just the night before last at supper, she was laughing and calling out jests with their company. Argyle must be mistaken, but why would he lie? One thing he knew for certain was that he would never make sense of the matter with the endless ringing of the blasted bell.

His hands flew to his ears. "Damn it, why does that bell still ring?"

"Your father hopes the bell will draw the good Lord's eyes so that he might look upon his daughter and heal her. The bell will ring until she is well again."

Argyle's words caused a shiver to creep down his spine. He knew his father would not have made such a command if his mother's condition was not desperate. He looked imploringly to his old friend, expecting to receive some words of comfort—perhaps there was hope—but the old man only shook his head. He backed away from Argyle and then ran toward Dun Ara Castle. As he entered the small baily he saw Aidan.

"Ronan, at last, we have been scouring the moors and forest for you," he said loudly. Then he spoke for Ronan's ears alone, "What took you so long? Do you know how hard it was to secure your privacy in the midst of a search party?"

"I do not want to talk about that now. Tell me, Aidan, is my mother's condition as Argyle described?"

"I am sorry, Ronan. She is lost to fever." Ronan raced toward the keep as Aidan called after him, "Prepare yourself, my friend, she

suffers."

He rushed to the large doorway leading into the great hall. Then he sprinted up the stone stairs, taking three at a time. Outside his parent's rooms sat Father Colin. The priest rose. His short hair stood straight on end from his hands pulling on the red strands with worry. A fleeting look of relief passed over his thin face as he saw Ronan, but his expression soon settled back into grim lines.

"It is good that you have come, Ronan. Your father has wondered if your presence might help. Her condition is grave, my boy, but perhaps you might bring her some peace."

Ronan was stunned by his first view of Anwen. He froze in the doorway as a great fear crept into his heart. His kinsmen had tried to warn him, but nothing could have prepared him for the reality of his mother's body soaked with sweat and tears and writhing in agony on his parent's bed. He looked to his father whose haggard appearance made him seem older than his forty-nine years.

Nathair had yet to notice Ronan's arrival. He was kneeling beside his wife, trying to still her trembling form. Ronan heard his father's soft whispers crooning to the woman he loved. As if sensing Ronan's presence, Nathair's head snapped toward the door. Ronan saw a steady flow of tears drip into the MacKinnon's beard. He rushed to kneel beside his father.

"Look to our lady, to my Anwen. Look at what has become of her." Ronan took hold of his mother's hand.

"Mother, I am here now." Her black hair, drenched with sweat, clung to hollow cheeks as pain stricken eyes sought his own.

"Nachlan, is that you," she wheezed. "Nachlan, where have you been? I have waited supper for you."

"Your son, Nachlan, cannot be here, mother. 'Tis me, Ronan."

"Who are you?" she cried. "Help me, Nachlan. Please help me. The pain is so great."

A broad hand gripped Ronan's shoulder. "She is lost to the fever, son. She does not know anyone. I was hoping…" Nathair choked on his words, letting them trail off.

His father had prayed for his swift return, believing Anwen could never forget her only living son. Ronan stood, filled with resolution.

"Father Colin," he called, "have you sent for the Abbot?"

"Dugald and Guthrie sail for the Isle of Iona even as we speak."

He nodded his approval and turned toward the door. "Father, I will return presently. Remain by her side. If she becomes lucid, she will be frightened if you are not here."

"Wait," Nathair called. "Where are you going?"

"I will be right back, but I must speak with Aidan."

"Aidan cannot help, Ronan. No one but the Heavenly Father can

help her now."

"There is one, father—a healer with skills that surpass our own. Aidan will sail without delay."

"And this healer, she will come to Mull without sending word or warning first." Nathair ran his hand through his hair in agitation. "What if she refuses him?"

Ronan turned back and looked his father straight in the eye. "She will sail willingly with Aidan, or, at my command, he will bring her bound and gagged if need be. But by my word, father, she will be here before nightfall tomorrow."

Chapter 16

Shoney sat unmoving beneath their tree and watched Ronan's departure. The sun blazed high in the sky above, shining brightly on the hilltop where he would appear again. She wondered what ills he faced while she sat discarded and useless. She knew he did not intend to wound her, but like her mother warned, he would not, or rather could not, uphold his vows. She did not doubt the goodness of his intentions, but despite what he believed, he was as likely to control the minds of men as he was to control the tides. He would never truly be hers.

The sun descended from the sky, and still she sat motionless and ever waiting. The world around her was painted in the gold and pinks of sunset, and with the approach of twilight, she silenced the debate thundering in her mind. He vowed to return to her by nightfall, and this small promise she knew at least he would keep. As the moors changed from green to purple, she was filled with anticipation. The moon rose high in the sky, and though there was no sign of Ronan, she kept her faithful vigil.

But the night could not last forever, and as it grew old and anguish filled her sedentary bones, uncertainty crept back into her heart. Regardless of whether or not he kept his word this night, she knew tomorrow would only bring more broken promises. She would never be accepted by the clan, and he would never give up his family and position for her. He was duty-bound as the future laird. He would sacrifice his own happiness for the greater good of his people. It is what he had been trained to do; it is what he believed was right.

Her instincts commanded her to stand and walk away, but she refused to take her eyes from the hilltop for even a moment. The love she bore him was so great. She felt it alive deep within herself. Without him she was lifeless, soulless—a vacant mass of flesh and bone. Surely, if he endured even a moment of the pain she felt, he would come back to her and fight for her.

"It would be him against the world," she said out loud.

How could she ask that of him? But, equally, how could he ask her to give up her beliefs and the very name her mother gave her?

The darkness began to recede, and the first morning bird sounded. The Skylark's song twisted her heart as it marked the true passing of night. Only then did it become unbearably clear that their promises to each other had been made in vain. Sooner or later, Ronan would chose his destiny, and it would be one in which she played no part.

For the first time since Ronan's departure, she shifted her gaze and stared at her empty hands. She hung her head and felt a rush of

pressure surge from deep within her body. It traveled the length of her abdomen and into her throat, pushing against the walls of her mouth until she finally opened her lips and let go an earsplitting sob. A flurry of birds filled the air, jetting out of the tree branches as they fled from her deafening cry.

She felt a cool rush of air on her face, and once more, she heard the whispers on the wind—soft feminine caresses from a long descent of ancestral women who had also loved and lost. Driven by the strength in their voices, she stood and shook Ronan from her skirts. Her legs protested the sudden movement, but she welcomed the pain; it was a reminder that she was indeed alive and very much in possession of name and of soul. She would return home, and she vowed never again to deny her instincts or the wisdom revealed by her visions.

From her satchel she withdrew the Witch's cloak. She fanned it over her shoulders and pulled the hood low over her head. The fabric was thin, but it felt like stone across her back. It was her weapon in a battle that ended centuries ago; a battle she single-handedly still waged against an entire kingdom. Her mother refused to give her allegiance to the Scottish King, and Shoney would not fail her.

She assumed the gait of a crippled hag. Ronan may know her as Shoney, but as far as the rest of the world was concerned, she was the Witch of Dervaig. He would never sweep the cloak from her shoulders, allowing her to stand with pride. And she would never be content masquerading as a Scottish lass or as his secret whore.

Trails of tears coursed down her cheeks; try as she might, she could not stop crying. Her vision was blurred by the endless pools filling her eyes, which caused her to stumble and trip so that she need not feign the Witch's gait. Finally, she arrived home, and as the door shut behind her with a loud thud, she prayed to the Mother of all to give her the strength to do what she must—she would leave him before he left her.

She hung the cloak on its peg and began to pull off her clothing.

"No, don't do that," someone cried.

Shoney whirled in the direction of the voice and saw the shadow of a man in the far corner near her pallet. She lunged for her sword.

"Reveal yourself, fiend." Her voice sounded courageous to her own ears, but inside she quivered with fear. From out of the shadows strode Aidan with his hands raised above his head.

"'Tis only me," he said. "I'm sorry to have caused you such alarm. I've been waiting for you since last evening, and I'm afraid I fell asleep over there and did not hear your arrival."

He walked toward her, cautiously eyeing her blade. "I spoke hastily to ensure you stayed altogether garbed in my presence. Ronan has a mighty temper and would cut the eyes from my head if I ever saw

you…well…you know."

She watched a smile briefly flit across his features, but it soon past, replaced by a soberness that surprised her. The brief occasions she had met Aidan he seemed to take nothing serious, except of course the risks which Ronan and Shoney were taking to be together.

"Tell me, Aidan, why you are here?" No sooner did the question pass her lips then she formulated her own answer. She inhaled sharply, covering her mouth with her hand. The room began to spin as she felt herself fall, but Aidan caught her.

"He is injured—isn't he? The village was attacked and he fell," she croaked.

"No, Shoney. Ronan is alive and well in health, although his spirit suffers. There was no battle. The bell rang for his mother." Shoney did not understand. Aidan answered the query in her eyes.

"She is ill, gravely so. Her condition baffles our healers. They have no cure or even relief. You are our last hope." Aidan moved toward the door. "Pack what potions you will need and come, please." She heard the urgency in his voice, but she did not move. "Shoney, hurry —we must away."

"Ronan knows you are here?" she asked.

"Aye, I am here on his orders."

She turned her back to Aidan, "I am sorry but I cannot."

"That is an unacceptable answer, Shoney."

She whirled around. "Ronan gave me an unacceptable answer yesterday when once again he refused to bring me to the village."

Aidan began to pace the room. On several occasions he turned to face her as if to speak; then he shook his head, apparently deciding a different approach was needed. She sighed as she began to build a fire. There was nothing Aidan could say about Ronan that would change her mind. But he must have sensed this intuitively, because when he spoke he did not mention his friend.

"You are a healer, Shoney," he implored. "There is a good and virtuous woman who needs your help. Her name is Anwen. She is mother to every child in our clan and sister to every woman. Do not do this for Ronan. Do this for her."

Instantly, her resolve dissipated.

Three years had passed since her mother died from an illness Shoney could not cure. The pain still ripped through her every time she pictured her mother's beautiful face.

"I will go, Aidan, but hear this and hear it well. I am not a witch. I have no magic. I will come armed with herbs, poultices, and potions not with spells or miracles. I will do everything in my power to help Anwen, but she may still pass from this world."

"I understand your full meaning, Shoney. Now please make haste.

The hour is later than I would like."

She asked Aidan to describe her symptoms while she searched her table for appropriate remedies.

"I do not know much, but I know the illness came on fast with a hot fever and terrible pain in her stomach and back," Aidan said.

She had an idea of what ailed her, but she could not be sure until she spoke with the women in her attendance. She doubted Aidan knew how frequently she was using her chamber pot or whether she had reported any discomfort when she expelled. Shoney became grave with concern.

"Aidan, if I am right, then her condition is very serious. We must hurry. Every moment is crucial." Aidan nodded and took the satchel from Shoney's hand as she turned to grab the Witch's cloak.

"No, leave the hag's garb," he directed. "Today, you come as yourself."

She whirled around and looked at him with wide eyes and her mouth agape. She could not believe her ears.

"I am to walk into the village as I am, as me," she stammered.

"Yes, Shoney, just as you are," he smiled. Then he opened the door and held it for her to pass.

"Why did you not say so in the first place?" she smiled.

"Come along," he urged. "We must away." She nodded in agreement and followed him out the door.

"Where is your horse?" Shoney asked.

"We aren't going to ride," he answered.

"What?" Shoney did not understand how Aidan could have been so careless. It would take over an hour for them to walk to the village. What if it was too late by the time they arrived?

"Mother of all, Aidan, why did you walk?"

"I didn't walk," he said. "I sailed."

"Whatever for?"

"For speed," he replied.

It was hard to believe sailing was the fastest route to Gribun, but what did she know? She had never before set foot in a boat.

Despite the grim nature of their voyage, she could not help but be excited. Aidan led her behind her hut and down the cliffs to where a boat was tied. It seemed very small compared to most of the ships she had seen pass by. Perhaps only three or four men could have fit. She took Aidan's offered hand, but as she climbed aboard she was not prepared for how the boat rocked, and she squealed as she almost fell over. Aidan thankfully caught her and helped her to her seat. Her face warmed with embarrassment.

"This is my first time in a boat," she explained.

"I never would have guessed," he winked.

She was breathless with anticipation and more than a little nervous as Aidan untied the vessel. Straight away, they were taken out to sea by the waves. She watched as he unfurled the sail, which swelled with the steady winds. As they sped over the water, she sat in wonder, staring at the coastline and the sky overhead. She felt like a bird flying over the sea. Closing her eyes, she lifted her face toward the sun.

Then she suddenly remembered where they were going, and she thought for a moment she might be sick.

"You look a bit green, Shoney, but do not worry. Many people experience a little stomach upset when sailing; it should pass soon."

Little did Aidan know she was not ill because of the surf but because of the dread consuming her from within. She was going to the village and would be presented to Ronan's family. She had wanted this, longed for it in fact, but now that her desire was coming to fruition, she was afraid. What if the clan persecuted her despite Ronan's support? What if they banished her from the village or Mull altogether? Or worse yet, what if Ronan was made to suffer? Fear was taking hold of her, stealing her breath and causing her to quiver in her seat.

"No," she said aloud. Aidan turned and looked at her in surprise.

"What is it, Shoney? Did you forget something?"

"I can't do this, Aidan. They will hate me. They will hurt me."

He took hold of her hand. "Have courage, Shoney. Trust me. Trust Ronan. We will let no harm befall you."

Nothing Aidan could say would ease her fear, but his words gave her the courage to continue forward. She never felt more terrified or more determined in all her days. Regardless of what happened, the truth would be known and her identity revealed. Never again would she don the crone's cloak. The Witch of Dervaig was no more.

They pulled into port, and he jumped onto the dock to secure the boat. Shoney spotted a man rushing in their direction, she presumed to lend Aidan a hand. She watched his approach unable to move or breath. Her stomach was twisting in knots, and she could feel perspiration wetting her brow. It was too late to turn back now. Her secret was almost exposed.

The stranger called out to Aidan, but Aidan did not look in his direction. Instead, he turned to Shoney and flashed her an awkward smile. He suddenly seemed nervous as he fidgeted with a rope, winding it and unwinding it around his wrist. He must be dreading his kinsman's initial response to having the Witch of Dervaig come to visit

"Aidan, where do you come from, and who is this?" the man asked as he approached, looking at Shoney. He was a broad man and thickly muscled with wild long brown hair. He was not handsome like Aidan or Ronan, but his eyes were gentle, and there was something very

pleasing in his countenance.

She took a deep breath. And so it begins.

"Hello, Guthrie," Aidan said. "I've just returned from Iona."

Iona? Shoney was confused.

"Ronan heard of a healer from Skye visiting relations there. He sent me to fetch her with all haste."

A healer from Skye? So that is why Aidan came to her by boat. He must have sailed to Iona first, but the healer refused him, and so he came for her. That she was Ronan's second choice did not matter now. With Aidan's assistance, she stood on the docks of Gribun in plain view without the coverage of cloak. She held her breath as Aidan turned to his friend. In moments, she would hear her name on his lips, and soon everyone would know she was Shoney, daughter of Brethia.

Aidan cleared his throat nervously. "Guthrie, allow me to introduce Bridget."

"What?" Shoney cried, but Aidan ignored her astonished outburst as he continued, "Aye, this is Bridget, Bridget MacLeod."

Ronan sighed with relief. Anwen slept at last. He and his father knelt like sentries, one at each side of her bed. With every breath she took, he allowed himself to hope, but each hard won gasp was shallower than the last. As she exhaled, he leaned closer, waiting once more for her chest to rise.

The hour grew late. Aidan should have returned with Shoney by now. What if she refused to come? When they last parted, she had been furious, but what other choice did he have but to answer the call of the bell? Then her voice crept into his mind—he could have taken her along. He could have declared to all that the Witch of Dervaig was no more than a legend. That in her stead was a virtuous woman of flesh and blood whom he loved. He could have, but he chose once again to leave her behind. Was Shoney right? Was he ashamed of her?

He shook his head. He knew that was not the truth, but he had lied to himself and to her. The clan would never welcome her, and his father would never forgive him if he tried.

If only she had agreed to his plan to take on a fresh identity; then these questions and doubts would not be plaguing his mind. It was foolish for her to grip so tightly to a way of life that had long since disappeared into the mists of time. She was stubborn, but then again so was he, and he would win this battle. If Aidan was able to execute his plan, then he may have already won. Perhaps Bridget MacLeod, the healer from Skye, was right now climbing the stone stairwell to his mother's rooms.

He looked toward the door, willing it to open and reveal Shoney's arrival, but the heavy wood remained closed. He growled with frustration. They should have been here by now. He instructed Aidan to sail to the cliffs beneath Shoney's hut and wait one day's time before his return; the delay was a necessary risk if the clan was to believe the healer had been retrieved from Iona.

"She grows weaker." Nathair interrupted his thoughts.

"I know, father," he replied.

His father jumped to his feet. "I must act, Ronan. I must do something. I cannot wait idly by while she dies in my arms. I must fight for her. Tell me what to do."

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Ronan inhaled sharply and held his father's gaze for a moment. He knew Nathair carried the same prayer—let it be the healer at the door.

Father Colin stepped inside and addressed Nathair, "Good Laird, the healer, Bridget MacLeod of Skye, late of Iona, has arrived."

"Yes, yes, bring her in," Nathair urged.

Ronan held his breath. He could not believe Shoney was in his home, standing just beyond the door. It was all he could do not to push past the priest and take her into his arms. But when she walked into the room, her eyes blazing with fury, he knew even if he threw caution to the wind and gathered her into his embrace, it would not be welcomed.

He was a fool to expect anything but hostile steel eyes. He commanded Aidan to let her believe she was coming to the castle as herself, as Shoney. Only when they arrived in port was the pretense to be revealed. By the look on Shoney's face, Ronan knew his plan had worked.

"Bridget," began the priest, "allow me to introduce Nathair, Laird of the MacKinnon."

As warm grey eyes turned to greet Nathair, Ronan relaxed a little. At least she had a smile for his father.

"I am pleased to meet you and to be of service," she said.

"Thank you, Bridget was it?" Nathair said coldly. His father's lips settled into a grim line as he crossed his arms and stared at Shoney with disdain. Ronan shot Aidan a puzzled look, but he seemed just as surprised by Nathair's contemptuous attitude.

"Father Colin, please leave us," the Mackinnon instructed.

Nathair bolted the door after the priest all the while sneering at Shoney. She sucked in a sharp breath as his scorn washed over her. Her anger with Ronan was forgotten, replaced by sudden trepidation. Nathair's eyes were every bit as amber as Ronan's, but they narrowed into hateful slits as he slowly moved toward her. Searching the room for amber eyes filled with love, she met Ronan's gaze and found the comfort she sought. With tilted chin and straight back, she faced Nathair again but this time with a warrior's courage.

He sneered at her, drawing his sword. Without hesitation, she lunged for the iron poker by the fire place, but as she turned, poker raised at the ready, she realized she was not the one under attack. Instead, Nathair rushed at Ronan. She screamed. Ronan stood unflinching. He did not raise his sword or back away as Nathair's blade began its swift descent toward his skull.

"No," she cried and turned away, expecting to hear the gruesome sound of blade cutting flesh and bone, but instead the clang of metal reverberated throughout the room. It was Aidan's blade that intervened. The laird's eyes bulged and sweat dripped down his red face as he strained to overcome the warrior protecting his son.

"A witch," Nathair spat. "You bring a witch to your mother's deathbed."

Ronan met her gaze. He looked as surprised as she felt. "How did

you know?" he said.

Nathair spun around, keeping his sword aloft. "I know who you are," he seethed. "You are the Witch of Dervaig like your demon whore mother before you."

She raised her weapon. The sheer size of her opponent stole her breath. His broad shoulders were only slightly smaller than Ronan's, and he stood only a hand shorter. Despite her fear, she did not flinch as he advanced. Her only hope rested in her ability to deflect the might of his first assault. She was smaller, quicker, and her weapon lighter. If she could thrust before he was ready to strike again, then she might survive. Her stance was firm, and her arms were steady, but her skills were not to be tested against the chieftain of the MacKinnon. Ronan moved behind his father and, taking hold of the MacKinnon's arm, he wrenched the sword from his hand. Relief was hers for only a moment as Nathair continued his slow perusal.

The raw aggression on his face sent chills down her spine, causing her to forget she was now the only one still in possession of a weapon. She staggered back against the wall. No sooner did she feel the cold stone of the castle behind her then Nathair's image disappeared. Ronan and Aidan lunged in front of her, shielding her from harm. Shoulder to shoulder, they formed an impenetrable blockade. Their great muscled frames made her feel as slight and insignificant as a wisp of smoke. Breathless, she leaned her forehead against Ronan's back. She had expected to face prejudice, but nothing could have prepared her for the expression of naked loathing in Nathair's eyes.

"Back down, father," Ronan growled.

"Your father," Nathair called out to her, ignoring Ronan's warning, "Alec MacKinnon, was struck on the battlefield at my side. Before he died, he confessed his vile affair with your mother and warned they begot a child of Satan."

"Enough, Father," Ronan shouted, but Shoney interrupted him.

"No," she said from behind their backs. "I would hear what he has to say, Ronan." Her mother never spoke of her father, and until that moment, Shoney never knew his name.

"She appears to be very familiar with you, boy," Nathair sneered. "So this is why our fields have gone unplowed. You have been plowing a witch instead."

Ronan's shoulders tensed, and the vein at his neck throbbed, but he did as she asked and refrained from speaking.

"It seems as though my son has fallen victim to your sorcery. Your beauty is indeed unmatched—like your mother's." His voice sounded distant now as if he had moved across the room. "Alec spoke of her unrivalled beauty. I had to see for myself the witch's spell that could

mask the hideous face of the Witch of Dervaig. So I hid out near your window, and at nightfall, after she limped back into her hut, I peered inside. She swept the cloak from her shoulders, and there she stood. Ropes of golden hair danced like Satan's fire at her hips, and eyes that gleamed like steel swords met my own."

Shoney jumped as a low wail filled the room, interrupting the laird. Peeking behind Ronan's arm she noticed Anwen for the first time lying in a large bed the likes of which Shoney had never seen. Shoney took in Anwen's ashen skin and her raspy breathing and knew she had to act fast, or they would lose her.

"Ronan, I must tend to your mother before it is too late," she whispered.

He took hold of her hand and held it tightly. She squeezed his to offer her encouragement as his eyes flitted to his mother and then to his father.

"Father, despite what you might think of Bridget, she is a very skilled healer."

Nathair shook his head. "No. If I am right, you are an instrument of Satan. If I am wrong, you still have a fey look about you, like one of the fair folk. Your hands will not touch my wife."

"MacKinnon," Aidan interrupted, "with every due respect, we are losing her. We have exhausted all of our knowledge. She is your last hope. Let the girl try."

Nathair stared at his wife as she twisted and cried out with pain. His shoulders stooped, and his eyes glazed over with fatigue as the fight left him. It was clear to Shoney he had given up all hope.

"The Lord, Jesus Christ, has forsaken this home. Let the heathen try," Nathair said as he shuffled toward the door. Before he left, he turned back and said, "We are damned—all of us."

Then he was gone.

Shoney did not hesitate one moment after the laird's departure. "Ronan fetch the women in your mother's attendance. Aidan put more wood on the fire." Both men were swift to carry out her bidding. She laid her satchel on the table next to Anwen's bed and began unpacking the various herbs and potions. She had meadowsweet and chamomile for pain, a mixture of ivy and nettle juice to cure infection, and mugwort oil and quickgrass to heal womanly diseases.

Three women were soon standing before Shoney awaiting her instruction. Ronan introduced her as Bridget and once again the feelings of anger and betrayal returned, but she shrugged them off. She could not allow herself to be distracted. A woman's life depended on her.

The oldest woman was called Morna, and despite her years, she was

beautiful with salted black curls and bright blue eyes, leaving no doubt in Shoney's mind that she was Aidan's mother. There was also Flora who was short and slight of build, smaller even than Shoney. Flora's brow furrowed with worry as she stood wringing her hands. Then there was Una who was close to Shoney in age. She was a striking girl with black curls and wide black eyes, and when she turned to the side, Shoney could tell she was expecting.

"Ladies, let us get to work. Morna, strip off her damp clothing and change her blankets. 'Tis important she stays warm and dry."

Shoney passed Una a mug crammed with crushed meadowsweet. "Fill this with boiling water, and allow it to steep for several minutes; then see that she drinks it down. It will ease her pain."

"Morna, I need to know if Anwen has felt discomfort while relieving herself."

"It has caused her much pain. In fact, it was her first complaint when she told me she was feeling unwell. We gave her mugwort tea to cleanse her womanly areas, but it has not seemed to have any effect."

Shoney nodded, "'Tis as I expected. You were well advised to give her the tea, but I think she may have revealed her discomfort too late for that cure. It has spread to other places in her body, which is why she has succumbed to fever."

"What must we do, Bridget?"

She blinked for a moment in confusion. She had forgotten that she was Bridget and not Shoney. She glared at Ronan. He gave her the name she chose as her alias when they first met. Only then she had been Bridget MacLean.

"Bridget?" she said with annoyance.

He smiled at her and shrugged. "It suits you, lass."

Her scowl deepened as she gestured toward the door. "Leave us now," she said to Aidan, "and take your friend." She turned her back on the men as she picked up her vile of mugwort oil, but a gentle touch on her shoulder drew her attention. She twisted her head to find Ronan standing behind her.

"Thank you for coming, Shoney," he whispered.

"Ronan," she said impatiently, "I will do everything in my power to save her. Now go, please. We will call you if we have need."

"The meadowsweet tea is brewing, Bridget."

Shoney smiled at Una. "Good. Now wait just a few minutes before you administer it. Flora, I need you to fetch me a large head of cabbage and be swift."

Shoney had a hunch that the tiny lady could move quickly, and she did not disappoint. She darted from the room with yellow hair flowing behind her, reminding Shoney of the little Yellowhammer birds that whizzed by her window in the morning.

“Morna, mugwort oil is much stronger than the tea and will penetrate her whole body, which just might do the trick, but first her pain needs to be eased. How is the tea, Una?” Shoney asked.

“’Tis ready,” she replied.

Una knelt beside Anwen’s pallet and tried to lift her head, but Anwen was writhing and shaking, making it impossible for Una to feed her the drink.

“Right,” Morna said. “Step aside for a moment, Una. Bridget and I will hold her down.”

Shoney helped Morna steady Anwen’s head and each held down a thrashing arm as Una gently poured the tea down her throat. Before long, Anwen was asleep.

“She burns so hot,” Morna whispered as she stroked Anwen’s face.

“Give her the oil. We must stop the infection,” Shoney said.

Just then the door flew open and flora stood gasping and waving a head of cabbage. “I found one,” she cried and rushed to Anwen’s side.

Shoney took hold of the cabbage and told the women to turn Anwen on her stomach. Then she pulled off several of the biggest leaves and arranged them over her lower back. Next she positioned a long piece of dressing over the leaves and instructed the women to help her turn Anwen back over. After laying several more cabbage leaves across Anwen’s stomach, she firmly tied the dressing in place so that the leaves pressed into her skin.

“The cabbage will draw out the illness,” Shoney said.

She worked through the night with Morna, Una, and Flora at her side. The women never faltered or complained of fatigue. They listened carefully to her instructions and performed each tasked as asked. For so long she had been without the companionship of women, and now she was exchanging knowledge and sharing in the struggle to revive a woman who carried the spirit and hope of the clan.

She looked at the pale, peaceful face. She had lessened Anwen’s pain, for she slept now without tremors or tears, but her fever was still very high. She worried that even if the mugwort oil rid Anwen of the infection, she had burned too hot for too long. If she did recover in body, her mind still may be lost.

Having exhausted all medicinal remedies, Shoney turned her mind to the great women of her descent. She prayed for them to come sit by Anwen’s side and expel the darkness possessing her body.

“Ladies, come sit with me and join hands.” None questioned Shoney. They sat together on the bed, forming a circle around Anwen.

“You are her kinfolk, her sisters in life. She needs to know you are here. She needs to know she is not alone in the dark.”

“Would you have us pray?” Morna asked.

“I would have you sing, Morna. She will hear your song.”

It was Una who crooned the first fragile note, and one by one the other women joined in until their voices combined into one ethereal sound.

Hail to thee, thou new moon,
Guiding jewel of gentleness.
I am bending to thee my knee,
I am offering thee my love.

I am bending to thee my knee,
I am giving thee my hand,
I am lifting to thee mine eye,
O new moon of the seasons.

Thou queen-maiden of guidance,
Thou queen-maiden of good fortune,
Thou queen-maiden my beloved,
Thou new moon of the seasons. †

Shoney closed her eyes as the song washed over her. It was as fragile and airy as moonlight. She decided then and there that she was not so different from the Gaelic women who surrounded her. They too were born of the land and the sky.

Shoney knelt by Anwen’s side as the haunting music continued. She pressed her lips to her forehead. It still burned with heat. Shoney gently stroked her cheek and studied her peaceful face. At first glance, Ronan seemed to resemble only his father with the same golden brown hair and bright amber eyes. But she could see now the shape and set of his eyes were from his mother.

For the first time in many hours Shoney thought of Ronan. She pictured him pacing the hallway or racing across the moors on his horse as he tried to outrun his grief. He put his faith in her abilities and his beloved mother’s life in her hands. But as she looked at Anwen lying there, she could not help but see her own mother’s face during her final hours. She was just as frail as Brethia had been and her breathing was as shallow.

“Mother of all,” Shoney whispered, “let her live.”

Chapter 18

"Unlock this door," Nathair shouted. "God's blood, I've been a fool." He pounded again on the door.

"I am coming." Shoney unbolted the door and stepped out of the way as it slammed open. Nathair's eyes went first to the bed, which was empty.

"What have you done with her?" Nathair grabbed Shoney. She winced as his fingers bit into her arms. "Where is my wife, witch?" He shouted.

"Nathair," called a quiet voice by the window, "we owe that young woman my life. So kindly unhand her." Nathair released Shoney and turned to stare at Anwen who was sitting up in a chair by the large stone hearth.

"Are you real," he whispered.

"I am no ghost, my love," she smiled.

Nathair rushed to her seat and knelt, placing his head in her lap. "I thought I had lost you. I was mad with grief."

He kissed her hands. Then he stood and cradled her in his arms. Despite Nathair's cruelty, Shoney smiled as she watched their reunion. It was clear the chieftain and his lady were very much in love. He carried her over to the bed and laid her down.

"Rest more, my love. I must go find Ronan and tell him of your recovery. He suffers." Nathair kissed her lips. Then he started toward the door.

"Nathair," Anwen called.

He stopped and turned, "Yes, my love?"

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Anwen nodded her head in Shoney's direction.

"You have said naught to Bridget."

Nathair expelled a long breath. Then he turned and looked at Shoney. They stared at each for a long moment before he said a hurried thank you and departed.

Shoney was suddenly very nervous. If Nathair had gone to find Ronan, then at any moment he would walk through the door, but she was in no condition to face him. She was exhausted and vulnerable. She did not have the strength to resist him. He would stand in the doorframe, their eyes would meet, and she would say goodbye to Shoney forever and surrender herself to his arms as Bridget. She had to leave that instant.

"I am so tired, Morna. I must go and rest," Shoney said weakly.

"Of course you are, my dear." Morna put her arm around Shoney's waist and addressed the other women. "We should all take our leave

and rest. Bridget, you will stay with me until a hut is readied for you."

"You should hurry if you want to escape the wave of visitors sailing this way." Anwen smiled and winked at Shoney. She blushed in response, feeling certain Anwen somehow knew exactly why she was fleeing.

"Let their visit be brief. 'Tis essential you rest," Shoney advised. Then she kissed Anwen's forehead and left with the other women.

They hurried together down the circular stone stairwell leading to the hall. Upon hearing some commotion outside the main entrance, Morna directed them all to a small side door. "Come, ladies. They will want to celebrate, and right now the only dancing I want to be doing is in my dreams."

"There will be a dance tonight to be sure," Una smiled, "and you, my dear Bridget, will need all the rest you can get."

"I do not understand," Shoney said.

"Tonight," Morna said, smiling, "the entire clan will pay homage to you."

"Look at her face, Morna. Why 'tis as green as a cut of fresh peat. Whatever is the matter Bridget?"

Shoney did not know who spoke. Her head was spinning, a dance in her honor. She had watched the clan revelries from a distance and always wished she could join, but in her daydreams she was always herself—Shoney. Tonight she was supposed to be Bridget MacLeod from the Isle of Skye, late of Iona when she had never before left Mull. Surely, the clan would see through their deception.

"Enough chatter, ladies. Let us get her home. She looks as if she might faint," Morna put her arm around Shoney's waist and guided her through the courtyard, passed the gate, and into the village.

News had spread of Anwen's recovery. People gave warm greetings and cheers as they passed. Morna, Una, and Flora gracefully returned every good wish, but they never slowed their pace or offered introductions. Shoney felt like she was in Aidan's sail boat again, only this time the village was the sea and the ladies were the waves propelling her forward.

Morna pointed out her hut just up ahead. Shoney, having observed the tidy entrance and smoke curling from out its rooftop, started to race forward, pulling the other women along. At the door, Una and Flora said their farewells, and as the door closed behind her against the commotion and noise, Shoney felt the peace that only comes with silence. She sighed with relief and closed her eyes as she sagged against the door and slid to the ground.

"It will do you no good to sleep there, Bridget," Morna chided. "You'll wake with such a crick in your back someone might mistake you for the Witch of Dervaig."

“What?” Shoney’s eyes snapped open.

“I didn’t mean to alarm you, dear. It was a jest. No doubt you’ve heard of the Witch even on Skye. Mind my words, Bridget, but don’t be telling anyone what I say, you need not fear the Witch.”

At first, she could not believe her ears; then it occurred to her that perhaps Morna was one of the women who had sought the aid of the Witch of Dervaig. She had never helped her, but mayhap her mother had. She stood and threw her arms around Morna, feeling as though she found an ally at last.

“Thank you, Morna,” Shoney said.

“Whatever for, a clean bed and a warm fire? I would give you all that I own and more to show my thanks for what you’ve done. Anwen is my best and oldest friend. By saving her life you have saved mine as well. Come now, lie here by the hearth where it is warm, and I will tuck you in.”

She snuggled beneath the blanket and closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of Morna moving about and taking care of what could not be put off until after her rest. For a moment, Shoney was a young girl again, pretending to be asleep while her mother worked into the night, preparing salves and potions. She felt safe, wrapped in the warmth of childish memories, but as she drifted off to sleep, she thought of Ronan and his sideways smile.

She knew he would be at the dance that evening, and she suddenly felt nervous thinking of what it would be like to dance with Ronan MacKinnon, son of the chieftain, with everyone looking on. Perhaps, just for one night, she would let herself play the part of Bridget MacLeod. For one night only, she would believe her dream of life with Ronan had come true.

Chapter 19

The courtyard was alive with music and dancing. Several cattle had been slaughtered at his father's command to mark the occasion, and the scent of roasting meat filled the air with its tantalizing aroma. The joyful significance of the night was not lost on Ronan. His mother's near brush with death had terrified him, but his mind was elsewhere. His body went through the motions of celebrating—eating, drinking, greeting friends, and graciously accepting the relieved embraces of his kinsmen, but it was Shoney who filled his thoughts.

His eyes skimmed the crowd. She was still nowhere to be seen. Perhaps, she had refused to come and was at that moment trudging over the moors toward her hut, vowing never again to see him. He stormed out of the courtyard with the intention of going after her, but when he passed through the gate, he met the blackness of night and knew she was going nowhere—at least not until daylight. He muttered a thank you to Shoney's god, Skatha, for not yet removing her fear of the dark.

He returned to the festivities, fixing a smile on his face. He just had to be patient. Morna would insist that Shoney come, and no one, even Shoney, could refuse Morna once she had made up her mind.

He tried to relax. She would soon arrive, no doubt furious and not without justification, but he also felt his reason for deception was defensible. When he first looked upon Anwen's failing body, gripped with pain, he knew Shoney was her only hope. Surely, she would understand he had no choice. The only way to ensure her safety in the village was to give her a new identity. Nathair's reaction to her presence only confirmed this.

He still could not believe his father had known. Nor could he forget the hatred that enflamed Nathair's eyes and blinded his senses at the very sight of Shoney. That kind of anger does not simply disappear—no matter that Shoney save his beloved's life. There would be a reckoning to be sure. Nathair had yet to confront him, but he knew it was only a matter of time.

His mind started to race, but all the while he maintained the appearance of the rejoicing son for the revelers that surrounded him. He raised his cup to toast his mother and then again to honor the healer, Bridget MacLeod.

"God's blood," Ronan swore aloud when he heard Shoney's alias called out in unison by the entire clan.

"She will never forgive me," he said turning to Aidan.

"She might," Aidan smiled, "but 'tis very unlikely."

Ronan scowled and was about to tell Aidan just where he could

stick his so-called words of encouragement when a flash of burnished gold caught his eye as Shoney passed through the gate and stepped into the courtyard. She soon disappeared from sight as a sea of grateful MacKinnons swallowed her up.

Morna, Una, and Shoney shuffled through the crowd as they advanced across the courtyard. Ronan's jaw clenched as he resisted the urge to push past everyone and scoop her into his arms, but as far as anyone knew, they only just met.

Finally, she stood before him. "Hello, Bridget," Ronan said.

"Ronan," she nodded.

He knelt before her then and took her hand. "I have no words for the gratitude in my heart." He kept his eyes downcast, wishing to avoid the fury he would surly find in her grey depths. But when he finally met her gaze, her eyes were brimming with tears, and her mouth curved into a gentle smile.

"My heart shattered the day my mother died. I am glad I could help save you from such grief."

He kissed her hand. "I know you sacrificed a great deal coming here to be with us, Bridget, but I need you to understand you were our only hope," he implored.

She said nothing, but smiled in response. A full smile and bright eyes were not what he expected, although they were a good sign. Perhaps, now that she was in Gribun, and a hero to the people, she was willing to forgive the underhanded means that brought her there in the first place.

"Now that you are here, Bridget, let me just say it is my greatest desire you remain for as long wish."

"Quit fawning over her, Ronan," Una interrupted. "Come on, Bridget," she said taking Shoney's hand. "Let us join the dance."

Shoney was whisked away, leaping and kicking out her heels with the others as they wove through the tables and benches, eventually forming a large ring. The music was quick and lively with pipers and flutes. Ronan savored the expression of wonder that never left Shoney's face as she joined in the revelries. Everything was new to her, and he was nigh bursting with the joy of watching her partake in the pleasures she had long been denied.

As the large ring of dancers broke into pairs and groups of three, he decided he had kept his distance long enough. But just as he was about to grasp Shoney's hand, another man moved in and whisked her into a twirling reel. He wanted to flatten Cormick Mackinnon to the ground and beat the love-struck look from his face, but he took a deep breath and tapped him on the shoulder.

"I would ask to cut in, Cormick," he growled.

Cormick muttered a brief excuse to Shoney before he scampered

away. Ronan took her hands and together they stepped in a circle to the quick tempo of the music, but with every step, he pulled her closer and closer.

"No, Ronan," she protested. "No one can know how familiar we are with each other."

"I assure you, Shoney, no one here could know you and I have lain together." He dipped his head and whispered into her ear, "Or that I have tasted your skin and felt your warm thighs wrap around me."

"Hush, Ronan," she laughed. "Put some space between us." She wriggled from his arms and twirled in a circle. Her hair burned like crimsoned gold in the torch light.

"Ronan," she said, "this is my first dance."

Then she threw her head back and laughed, "What am I saying—this is my first everything."

"Not your first *everything*, my love."

She blushed, and his body responded immediately. His self-control was being tested. He glanced with longing high up the keep wall at his bedroom casement. He wanted nothing more than to throw her over his shoulder and race up to his rooms. He would stand her in front of his great hearth where the flames would warm her as he eased her tunic and kirtle over her head. He imagined the feel of her silken curves. His hands would stroke her skin, and she would tremble in response.

"Ronan?" Shoney said.

"What? Yes, I'm sorry. I was somewhere else. What did you say?"

"This music," she whispered, "'Tis beautiful."

Ronan followed Shoney's gaze to where a short, brawny man with flaming red hair stood strumming a harp. His voice was soft and clear as it drifted over the intent onlookers.

"That is Callum. He is a fine bard."

"His voice is like nothing I've ever heard. The song's poetry is beautiful, but what does it mean?" she asked wistfully.

"It refers to an old story of a young monk who claimed he was visited by Saint Columba in a dream. He told his abbot, who was of the Clan MacKinnon, that Columba bade the abbot set sail in search of a magical island. Wanting to please the Saint, the MacKinnon embarked on the dangerous voyage. Along the way, he encountered the plaintive song of a mermaid who lured him into the waves. She swam him safely to a sandy shore where he met an old man who did not return his greeting. The man was as still as a statue but for his eyes, which darted from the sky to the abbot's ship. When the colors of twilight painted the heavens and the waters, the old man suddenly turned away, shielding his eyes. The sky erupted with myriad veins of lightning, and deafening thunder shook the ground. Then right before

the MacKinnon's very eyes, his vessel and crew vanished."

"'Tis a chilling tale," Shoney whispered. "Remind me never to venture out upon the sea again."

"Are you enjoying yourself, Shoney?" he asked.

"More than you could ever know or understand, Ronan," she said as her face lit with laughter at the now drunk and raucous antics of a few of his clansmen. Shoney was wrong. He did fully understand the joy of the evening, for it was the finest he had ever known.

As the festivities drew to an end, he still could not believe how contented she appeared. Perhaps, she could be happy as Bridget McLeod.

"Shoney," he whispered, "I have something to show you." He guided her through the courtyard, past the gate, and into the village.

"You wouldn't be bringing me to your home, would you?" Shoney asked playfully.

"You've naught to worry about, lass; my intentions are entirely honorable. But if *you* wanted to come to *me* during the night, my rooms are in the keep. Be sure to use the stairwell opposite the one leading to my parent's rooms."

"I wouldn't wait up if I were you," she teased. "Where are you taking me then?"

"You'll see." He shrugged and gave her a lazy grin. "We are almost there."

As they approached the hut chosen for Shoney, Ronan was pleased to note the freshly swept entrance and smoke curling from the rooftop like fingers beckoning them inside.

"Here we are," Ronan said as he swung open the door.

She peered in. "Whose home is this?"

"'Tis yours, Shoney."

Her eyes were wide with surprise, and Ronan watched as a slow smile spread across her face.

"Come inside and see for yourself. Morna arranged everything. You have your pallet there against the far wall and a table and chair. Over here are baskets with potatoes and oats and plenty of peat for the fire. 'Tis all yours, Shoney." With dismay he watched her smile falter, and her eyes grow somber.

"You mean Bridget. Don't you?" she muttered.

"What?" he asked.

"You meant to say 'tis all yours, Bridget, because I am quite sure your clan did not give Shoney this home."

Were they back at the beginning again?

"God's blood, 'tis just a name," he swore.

"'Tis not just a name, Ronan. 'Tis the name my mother chose for me, and you are asking me to give up much more than that. Am I to

disgrace my mother and dishonor the gods?"

"Yes," he shouted. "Yes. If it makes you mine, then that is what I want you to do."

"But it would not be me." She turned away from him.

"Already you are not yourself," he snapped. "You are the Witch of Dervaig."

When she spoke next, her voice betrayed the tears she had tried to hide. "I will be loved for who I am or not at all, Ronan."

He reached out, and wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her close. "Hush, my love. Please do not cry, Shoney. Fight me. Scream. Pummel me with your fists, but do not cry."

"What have you done to her, Ronan?" He jerked around to see Morna standing in the doorway. She stomped over to where they stood and pulled Shoney from his arms.

"Are you going to tell me what you have done, lad, or need I go fetch your mother from her sick bed?"

"'Tis nothing, Morna," Shoney smiled. "I was just so overwhelmed by everyone's kindness and generosity. 'Tis such a beautiful home. I am truly honored."

"Indeed, Morna, you've done a fine job," Ronan said.

The older woman blushed, "Well, I cannot take all the credit. Flora and Una were of great help."

Morna began to bustle around the hut, straightening what Ronan noticed was already straight and wiping what was already clean.

"Well, my dear, I came to make sure you have everything you need. I noticed your satchel carried only medicines, bless your heart. Some of the ladies donated what they could spare for tunics and the like. They've been altered to fit your slim frame."

"My goodness, Morna, did you sleep at all today," Shoney exclaimed.

"Oh, don't you be worrying about me, lass. I will sleep like a plow at Yule tonight." She kissed Shoney on the cheek. Then she turned and gave Ronan a little shove.

"Now, out you go. You might be the size of three men, but you don't scare me, Ronan MacKinnon. You know better than to be bringing her here on your own. Her family is trusting us to care for her, virtue and all." She shoved him again. "Now, get."

"I would not dare risk your anger, Morna. I will take my leave." He looked beyond the older woman to where Shoney stood and winced as he met her scowl.

"Goodnight, lass. You no doubt will feel better in the morning." As he turned to leave, he muttered, "I hope."

Morna shut the door with a "humph" behind him. The night ended on a much different note than it began. Shoney had been jovial all

evening, smiling and dancing. She had even teased him wickedly, intentionally fueling the fire of his desire but how swiftly her mood changed.

God's blood, what game did she play?

He gazed up at the stars. "What would you have me do?" he asked.

"For starters, quit talking to yourself." Ronan turned to find Aidan standing behind him. He swore again.

"You are always under foot. Wipe that grin off your face, before I do it for you," Ronan growled.

Aidan's laughter only increased, "As I see it, there is but one answer to your problem, and you won't find it in the stars."

"Aye, and what is that?"

"Whiskey, my friend," Aidan said.

Ronan looked back at Shoney's hut. He pictured her lithe body as she undressed and lay down on the pallet with her fair skin glowing in the firelight.

"Damn it," Ronan swore. "Whiskey it is then, but I'm warning you now, Aidan. I am likely to get pissed drunk and beat someone to within an inch of life."

"No worries, my friend, we'll bring Guthrie along. He's already soused and won't feel a thing."

Ronan woke with a jerk. His father stood over him with an expectant look on his face.

"Get up, Ronan, We have to talk."

He sat up and winced. Damn it, but his head pounded. He remembered little about the night before other than drinking a fool's portion of whiskey. He looked around and saw he had passed out in the great hall alongside Aidan and Guthrie. The latter had a fat lip and a black eye, the responsibility of which no doubt was his.

"I'll be paying for that when he wakes up," he said aloud.

"Ronan, hung over or not, I would speak with you now," Nathair commanded. "Get those two louts on their feet and out of the keep and join me down by the docks." Then Nathair turned on his heels and strode out the door.

Ronan watched him exit. He remembered the fire in his father's eyes when Shoney first walked into his parent's quarters. He had yet to truly speak to his father since his mother's recovery, and he did so now with a measure of trepidation. His father had charged at him with murderous intent. If Aidan had not intervened, Ronan might have been run through. Of course, Nathair had not been in his right mind at the time. Still, Ronan knew this was not going to be a typical meeting with his father where they discussed clan business. He was going to confront Ronan about Shoney.

Ronan closed his eyes and prayed for Norse ships to attack their coastline so that the subject at hand might be avoided at least until he was no longer hung over.

"Christ, where the hell am I," Aidan groaned.

"You were just leaving," Ronan muttered. "Wake up Guthrie, and gather the men together for drills." Ronan stood up and stretched the ache from his bones. "I have a feeling we all need a good sweat after last night's indulgences."

"Where are you going now?" Aidan asked.

"The MacKinnon wants a word with me."

"Och, well you knew this was coming," Aidan winced. "If my head wasn't pounding, I'd wake up Guthrie and sing you a death march so you could meet your maker with dignity." Aidan groaned again. "But that being said, I can't open my eyes, and I think I'm dying."

"Get up, you sod," Ronan said, giving his friend a light kick to the ribs. "And wake Guthrie up, but not until after I leave. He has a shiner that I'm pretty sure I put there. Where my father has already reserved the right to wallop me this morning, I'd hate to disappoint him."

"Ronan, we both have six and twenty years to our credit. We have fought numerous battles and have the scars to prove our bravery, but your da scares me as much now as he did when I was a lad. I'd rather face a fleet of Norsemen than your da."

"As always I thank you, Aidan, for your encouraging words," Ronan said dryly. "I feel so much better."

"I do what I can, my friend," Aidan chuckled. "I'll see you on the fields."

There he was, Nathair, Laird of the MacKinnon, standing at the end of the pier, staring out to sea. He had not been Ronan's first hero; that role had belonged to his brother, Nachlan. In Ronan's youth, the MacKinnon was always an elusive figure, hard to reach and seldom available. It was Nachlan who first taught him to ride and wield a sword, but he died at sea during a storm off the Outer Hebrides when Ronan was eleven. He dived in to save a fallen brother and was never seen again.

For many days, Ronan stood at the end of the pier where his father stood now, looking out to sea for Nachlan's ship to return. One day, the MacKinnon came up behind him and rested his hand on Ronan's shoulder.

"He is gone, lad. Do not look to the sea for your brother's ship. He died with honor. Turn around and look to the land instead." Ronan did as he was bid.

"You are next in line to be chieftain."

"Aye, Father," he mumbled.

“Look with open eyes, lad. One day you will be responsible for every MacKinnon, every man, women, and child and every field that feeds and sustains the clan just as I am now.”

Ronan remembered feeling awed by the man who stood beside him, and ever since that moment, he had done all he could to walk in his father’s footsteps. Nathair was a great leader and warrior. He was fierce and honorable. Few saw his softer side, but Ronan knew he was also a gentle and loving husband.

Ronan took a deep breath and strode down the pier to stand alongside Nathair. After some time the MacKinnon spoke.

“To be a leader, Ronan, is to be alone.” Nathair turned and looked at him. “Never forget that. The council plays a part in every decision, but the outcome rests on your head.”

“Aye, Father.”

“The clan must always trust that even during the hardest times you are doing everything within your power to aid and not to harm. Do you understand me?”

“Aye, Father.”

“If you were to marry Bridget and her secret be discovered you would lose the trust of the clan. What say you?”

“I do not believe anyone will ever know. Her fictional origins are intentionally vague, and if someone did suspect that she was other than what she claimed, no one would entertain the possibility of her being the Witch of Dervaig. Beyond this, her merit is such that if any doubt regarding her identity were to arise, it would be soon forgotten.”

“If what you claim is true, and she has no sorcery, then she does seem to have all the fine qualities any young woman might hope for, excluding of course the fact that she is a heathen, Ronan. But listen well, my lad. If any mistrust arose or if the truth came out, the clan would never forget. Suspicion’s seed would be planted. If fortune holds, then ‘tis possible you and Bridget might never be called to task, but if sickness were to take hold or crops fail, they would cry out that you brought the wrath of God down upon their heads. Do you ken what I am telling you, lad? Despite her goodness, she is always one tragedy away from being the Witch of Dervaig.”

“It is a risk I am willing to take, father.”

“Your life is not your own to be careless with, son. As chieftain your life belongs first to the clan.” Nathair’s voice took on a foreboding note. “I have tried to appeal to your sense of logic and duty, because, in truth, I am ashamed for raising my sword against you the other night.”

“Father,” Ronan began.

“Enough,” Nathair snapped. “I have been more than reasonable. I

gave her a home, and her secret will not be revealed by me. I owe her this much. But you listen well, lad. Do not test me. Debt or no debt, I will tell the priest that the Witch of Dervaig disguised as a child of God is living among us, and he will purge our island of her black soul," he spat. "You must choose your destiny, Ronan. The laird of the MacKinnon lies with a woman of the MacKinnon—a daughter of Christ. I will have your decision tonight. If you choose Bridget, you will not be laird."

Chapter 20

"We climb again," Ronan shouted, "Move."

He turned to find his footing in the sheer cliff wall. He was several feet in the air when he noticed none of his men followed. He leapt to the ground.

"Something had best have rendered your ears useless, or you will find yourselves paying the penalty for defiance," he shouted.

"Jesus, Ronan," Aidan swore. "A word please, if you don't mind."

Ronan turned away from his men and released a loud, rumbling growl. He was seething with rage and wanted the world to suffer alongside him or at least his men. His father had given him an impossible choice—his clan and his family or Shoney. He could not live without Shoney, but he would not be the man she loved if he dishonored his family and abandoned his clan.

He turned around. All eyes were on him. He looked at Aidan, "What?" he shouted.

"Let's just step over here," Aidan said. Ronan followed him several yards away from the rest of his men.

"We've climbed that cliff quite a few times," Aidan began.

"Aye, what of it?" Ronan growled.

"We've done a month's worth of training already today."

Ronan grunted in reply and looked away. He was not interested in Aidan's complaints. He had his own problems.

"And what about poor Cormick. You nigh killed him earlier. And I know it was due to him asking her to dance last night."

"He shouldn't have touched her," Ronan growled again.

"He'd have to touch her if they were dancing, and 'tis not as if he knew she was spoken for."

"I wasn't too hard on him."

"You were sparring with him like he was King Haakon himself."

Ronan was losing his patience. "If your rambling has any point, Aidan, then I suggest you make it."

"I don't know what your da said, but you just go talk to him and work it out before you kill us all and rob the Norse of the chance."

Aidan was right. He hated when Aidan was right. His men had tolerated his ruthless orders long enough. Truth be told, he was surprised they had not rebelled sooner.

"Alright, Aidan, I will go to my father. He must be forced to see reason."

"No, you won't," Aidan said.

Ronan grabbed him by his plaid and lifted him in the air. "You push too far Aidan. I don't know if you noticed, but I am in a foul

mood."

"I was merely pointing out, friend, now may not be the best time to have it out with your da after all."

"Aye, and why not when you just told me I should?"

"Oh, no reason really. 'Tis just that a messenger from the king is heading this way," Aidan said.

"Damn it," Ronan swore.

He put Aidan down and covered his eyes against the glare of the sun and saw the rider in the distance, carrying the banner of King Alexander III.

He grinned.

His father and Shoney would have to wait. The messenger bore the battle colors of the king. It appeared as though God answered his prayer after all—war with the Norse was at hand.

"Warriors to me," Ronan shouted. "Aidan, find my father. Guthrie, summon the council to the keep. The rest of you, come with me. We ride out to meet him."

A mixture of unrest and excitement was brewing in the great hall. The food and drink went unnoticed as Ronan's men shifted about the room impatiently. The day's gruelling exercises and the overindulgences of the night before were forgotten. His men were ripe for battle. If someone shouted "charge," the roar of battle cries would fill the air, and the men would ride out eager to meet the enemy. He sat with the messenger and his father, awaiting the arrival of Argyle who moved slower these days. No messages would be exchanged until the entire council was together.

"If so ordered I could go meet Argyle and carry him the rest of the way," Aidan said.

"Patience, Aidan," Nathair reproached, "You disrespect your elder. If our departure is not immediate, you will spend tomorrow's entirety at Argyle's service."

Aidan spoke his apologies and took his seat just as the doors opened, and Argyle shuffled into the room.

The old man sat beside Nathair and asked, "What word from the king?"

"As you know, Haakon rejected King Alexander's claim over the Western Isles," began the king's messenger. "What you may not know is that Haakon arrived some weeks ago with a fleet of long ships and has been pillaging the western coast of the mainland."

"The Devil take the coward," cried Guthrie. The hall erupted into chaos as the men stood and voiced their fury.

"Silence," commanded Nathair. The men were quick to comply. Ronan could tell the king's man approved of the order the MacKinnon

maintained.

"King Alexander," the messenger began again, "has agreed to begin negotiations."

"What terms are negotiable?" Nathair interrupted. "We men of the Isles are Scotsmen. We must yield nothing to the Norse." The MacKinnon's words were met with cheers from his men.

This time, the messenger called for order. "Please, silence everyone and hear the king's plan." The MacKinnon nodded his acceptance of the messenger's request, and once again the men were silent.

"As we speak, Haakon and his fleet sail for the Isle of Arran where negotiations are to take place. Our King is going to prolong the talks over the remainder of the summer, ensuring the Norse fleet stays anchored in the waters of the Firth of Clyde come autumn. The harvest moon will ensure our enemy faces two foes in battle. The autumnal storms will waylay their ships, forcing them away from the isle to the mainland where they will be delivered broken and battered to an army of Scotsmen waiting on the coast of Largs."

"Will the storms wreak such havoc upon the ships?" Ronan asked.

"Aye, the Firth of Clyde means certain death for any sailor foolish enough to try its waters during a heavy storm. The fleet will be devastated," the messenger said. "Their long ships are light and narrow with shallow drafts. The waves will turn them over like twigs. Each one is likely to carry thirty to forty men or even more, but the vessels offer nothing for protection against the pounding waves. Many will drown, never making it to shore alive."

"But the shallow draft will allow them easy port on the coast of Largs," Guthrie said.

"Aye, to be sure," replied the messenger, "but by the time they pull their ships to shore, they will be broken and facing a Scottish army ready for battle."

"So he plans an ambush," Nathair said. "What say you, Argyle?"

"'Tis a shrewd plan as was to be expected of our young King. He has already managed to unite this country. He shall lead us to victory," Argyle replied.

"King Haakon will likely submit during negotiations before the summer's end," boasted Dugald.

"Indeed," Argyle said. "Alexander is clever despite the scarcity of his years."

Nathair turned to Ronan, "What say you?"

"'Tis a good plan," Ronan said, "but we will have to march soon."

"Aye," the messenger agreed. "You must leave before the summer's end. Largs is more than a fortnight's journey on foot, longer depending on the winds when you first set sail."

Nathair stood and addressed the room. "We must make

preparations as we leave within the month. Go home now and rest, for there is much to be done. Meet tomorrow in the courtyard at dawn." Then he turned to Aidan, "except for you."

Ronan had forgotten Aidan's earlier indiscretion, but clearly, Nathair had not. "Argyle, Aidan has offered to be of service to you on the morrow." Nathair gave Aidan a good natured slap on his back. "Please be sure to give him plenty of work."

"Why wait until tomorrow?" Aidan said to Argyle affably. "Let me walk with you, and you can decide if there is naught for me to do this very night."

"Ronan," Nathair said, drawing his attention away from the pair now slowly making their way from the keep.

"Aye, Father."

"Let us sup as we consider what needs to be done. We go to war," he shouted so all could hear. Then he raised his mug, "For Scotland."

"For Scotland," the men repeated and downed their ale.

Chapter 21

Shoney was busy, almost too busy to think about Ronan...almost. She had joined ranks with Morna and the other ladies in their numerous preparations for the warrior's departure. Large numbers of bannock bread were baked over open flame, and the blacksmith's hammer could be heard from the first light of dawn until the sun dipped beneath the sea as swords and axes were forged or repaired and spikes were added to oak shields. Iron blade heads were also fashioned and given to boys who inserted the tips into barbed shafts as piles of arrows began to form. Shoney and the other women polished the metals until they gleamed in the sunlight. Then they gathered and packed supplies. Every warrior would carry a large leather sack in addition to their usual sporran with dried herring, bannock, and oats.

As they labored, the stores were diminished, which added to their already heavy work load, for the village provisions would be refilled before Gribun was left with only a fraction of its usual defenses. By the end of each day, Shoney was exhausted and fell asleep as soon as she pulled her blanket beneath her chin, and in the morning, it all started again.

Every day before sunrise she awoke to a line of villagers waiting outside her door, each suffering from some ailment or another. She applied alder bark mixed with grease to burns and combined ground ivy and honey to dress open wounds.

That morning had been no different but for one unusual affliction. Just as she was saying goodbye to one of the blacksmith's apprentices who came early to fetch a supply of her burn grease to keep on hand at the shop, she spotted a small band of villagers making their way toward her hut with Flora in the lead. Holding a boy's ear in a firm grip, she explained to Shoney what had occurred the evening before. The boy, who was her youngest son, Dugan, had been playing near the Daione Shi Knoll.

Shoney knew the spot well. It was a rocky mound at the foot of a tall, jagged hill some distance from the coastline deep within the moorland. In the summer, it was a lush place. The hill was a steep, verdant green tower, littered with jutting rocks trailing down its surface. At the base of the hill, the rocks gathered in jumbled, moss-covered stacks. The moss was a rich emerald color and out from its shallow depths sprung tall, pink blossoms. How the abundant flowers grew out of the rocky knoll with only a thin layer of moss for a bed was a mystery, but every year they returned.

Giving her son's ear a good yank, Flora spoke of the clan's belief that the king of the faeries lived deep beneath the stones. Each year he

planted the pink flowers to attract young girls to the entrance of his lair where he lured them down below.

"'Tis a sacred but dangerous site," Flora explained as the onlookers nodded their heads in agreement.

Dugan turned crimson as Flora insisted he confess how he tripped while playing and fell directly on top of the knoll, crushing some of the famed pink flowers.

"Bridget, he is damned for certain. 'Tis only a matter of time before the faeries claim him as their own," she said, her eyes creased with worry.

"Cease your fretting, Flora," Bridget said as she took hold of her friend's hand. "He is too old to be raised as the faeries' own and too young to be of interest to their queen."

Flora's yellow head remained downcast as she seemed to consider Shoney's words. Finally, after several minutes she said, "What you say sounds right and should bring me comfort except for the warning in my heart. I am afraid, Bridget. Is there naught that can be done to ensure his safety?" Flora implored.

"If you wish to protect your son, then plant rosemary and gorse outside your door. The smell will keep the fair folk away. And for the next fortnight light a piece of fir-wood and walk around Dugan's pallet three times before he sleeps." This advice was met with murmurs of approval from the villagers in Flora's company.

She nodded, looking somewhat relieved, "I will do everything just as you have said." Then the little woman kissed Shoney on the cheek. "Thank you, Bridget. I knew you were the one to ask. We are all so glad you've come." With another hard yank on Dugan's ear, Flora and party quitted her doorstep with smiles of gratitude.

Remembering the pleading look the boy gave her as he was led away, Shoney chuckled. In the morning, they might be back only this time to mend Dugan's battered ear. She continued to knead the bannock dough as she stretched the muscles in her neck and shoulders. She could not remember ever feeling so tired or so alive with purpose. She was made an instant member of the clan. The villagers valued her opinions and looked to her for healing and relief.

Or, rather, they looked to Bridget.

She frowned. Despite feeling satisfied that her skills were finally being used, she was filled with sorrow. She had not seen Ronan since the night of the dance. She knew he kept away in order to keep her in Gribun. She would never leave without saying goodbye, and so he refused to give her the chance. Doubtless, he wanted to tempt her to stay by revealing what her life could be like if she became Bridget MacLeod for good. She could not deny that his plan was working, and in a way she was glad he kept his distance. All her life, she watched

the village from afar, imagining what it would be like to live amid all the comings and goings, laughter and noise. The reality surpassed her every dream, but she ached for him and dreaded his departure.

Sometimes her mind was hazy with longing, and she lost herself to daydreams. It would start with a breeze that swept the hair off her neck and made her tremble, reminding her of Ronan's warm lips searing a trail of slow kisses down her spine and across her bare thighs. Or, she would be admiring a fine tree in the distance, and then she would see his tall, thickly muscled frame leaning against the tree, naked as though they had just made love. His lips would curve to the side as he gave her his lazy grin. Then suddenly either Morna or Una would command her attention, forcing her head from out of the clouds and her feet back on the hard, brutal ground. Despite how she wished otherwise, her daydreams could not alter reality.

She threw a couple more loaves on the fire and looked to the midday sun. Today appeared no different than any other summer day, but to her and surely to the rest of Gribun, it was a dark day indeed. On the morrow, the men would leave. Ronan would lead them into battle, and she would return to her home on the cliffs and once again become Shoney.

"Bridget," Una's lyrical voice interrupted her thoughts, "would you like to sup with me tonight? You have not had a chance to meet Guthrie."

"But he leaves in the morning. Would you not rather spend the evening alone? Besides, I told you I met him briefly when I first arrived."

"I'm not asking you to spend the night," she winked and once again Bridget could not help but admire her friend's dancing black eyes and the frost of black curls contrasting against her white skin.

"Bridget, you look like how I imagined faeries looked as a child with your golden hair and queer silver eyes. You truly are lovely," Una said to Shoney's surprise.

"I was just thinking the same thing about you," she laughed. "Actually, not the part about faeries, I was thinking how becoming motherhood is to you. Your time is coming soon, is it not?"

Una smiled as she rubbed her swollen stomach. Then her black eyes became watery pools, filled with forlorn tears.

"Guthrie will likely be away during the birth. I was hopeful he would be here," she whispered.

"Oh, Una," Shoney folded her new friend in a warm embrace. "Do not fear. I will help you through the labor, and then you will have a beautiful surprise for Guthrie when he returns." Big, dark eyes, wide with fear stared back at her.

"He will return, Una."

She exhaled and dried her eyes. Then she straightened her tunic and brushed the curls from off her brow. “You are right, Bridget. All will be well.” Una pointed to the fire pit at their feet where several bannock rolls were turning black. “I can’t say the same for our bread,” she chuckled.

Shoney whisked the bannock off the flames with a small knife. They rolled onto the ground, stopping at the feet of a young boy.

“I hope that is not my supper,” he laughed.

“Take them and feed the chickens, will you?” Una called.

Shoney watched the boy grab the bread and run off to carry out Una’s bidding. She marveled at the whirl of activity surrounding her. The village was alive with the mingling of noises and smells, but there also was tension in the air. More likely than not, some of the men would not return, and the women already gave comfort to each other when fear crept into their hearts. Shoney refused to consider the possibility of Ronan not returning. That he might be struck down seemed impossible. He was too vital, too powerful. Surely, there was no warrior alive that could best him. The moment doubt stole its way into her heart, she shook her head and threw herself into the seemingly endless array of tasks to be done.

“Will you come, Bridget?” Una asked.

Shoney hated to disappoint her friend, but she was confident Ronan would come to her that evening. Surely, he would not go off to war without saying goodbye. With this in mind, she did not want to stray too far from her hut.

“I’m afraid I won’t be able to stay for long, but I will come around to meet Guthrie,” Shoney said.

“Thank you, Bridget, ‘tis important to me.”

They finished cooking the last of the bannock, and Shoney wondered what task would be next.

“Right,” Una breathed, “come along then. I told Morna we’d help polish the last of the steel. The Norse will be blinded by the gleam of our men’s swords. They won’t be given the chance to raise their own weapons.”

Shoney admired how Una struggled to remain hopeful and courageous in the face of war, and she could not help but envy the various certitudes that defined Una’s life—her kin, her duties, and a love shared with Guthrie, which thrived without deception. A lifetime of love from those around her had nurtured a strong and sensitive woman. She was a vital and essential member of her community.

Shoney hung her head in shame. She was a fraud and did not deserve the affection of her new found friend. More than ever, she wished for Ronan to appear around the corner and ease her uncertainty. She missed him and her vulnerability invited doubt about

his reasons for staying away.

What if his absence could not be blamed on his desire for her to remain in Gribun? What if his feelings had changed? Perhaps having seen her through the prejudiced eyes of his father, he now wanted nothing more to do with her. Or, mayhap, Ronan had finally accepted the truth that she had known in her heart for some time—the obstacles keeping them apart were too great to surmount.

"Bridget, lass do you hear me." Shoney looked up from the sword she was polishing and saw Morna staring down at her with a smile.

"Forgive me, Morna, I didn't hear you," She replied.

"You were daydreaming again, lass."

Shoney sighed, "So I was."

"One of these days you are going to have to tell me who he is," Morna chuckled, "but now is not the time. Tomorrow will be a hard day, so off you girls go. I will be around in the morning to wake you, Bridget."

She followed Una back to her hut and helped her prepare Guthrie's supper. It was not long before the door swung wide and a broad-shouldered warrior ducked his grinning head inside.

"Where is my pretty lass?"

He was not quite as large as Ronan, but he seemed to overwhelm the hut with both his form and his smile. Una rushed forward and threw her arms around Guthrie's neck. They shared a long, sensual kiss. Shoney could not help but feel awkward and out of place.

Una must have sensed her discomfort, because she pushed against Guthrie's chest as she tried to peel her lips away.

"Guthrie, we have company," she said as she pointed to Shoney.

"Hello there, Bridget. Forgive me, but I did not see you. Not that I would have resisted kissing my woman even if I had. Give us another, Una," he laughed as he pulled Una back into his arms. She playfully slapped his arm and chided him on his manners.

"So, Bridget McLeod, are you joining us for supper?" he asked.

"Nay," she said. "I can't stay long. Una wanted us to meet."

"Well then, come and sit with me while Una pours the ale."

Shoney shooed a chicken off one of the seats as she sat down at the table. Her mood was already improving. How could it not when in such fine company. Despite his looming departure and the uncertainty of his future, Guthrie's wide and infectious smile never faltered. He was not the handsomest of the warriors with bushy hair and a nose that had been broken too many times, but his eyes twinkled and filled with love every time he glanced toward his lovely Una.

"So Bridget, what do you think of the MacKinnon lads? Has anyone in particular captured your interest?" Guthrie asked. "Nary a maid has been able to resist Aidan's fine features, even my Una I'd wager. That

is until I won her over with my hairy good looks," Guthrie teased.

"Aidan seems a good and fine sort of man, but I would not fancy binding myself to a man who was prettier than I," Shoney said, causing Guthrie to whoop with laughter.

"Teasing fair Aidan is one of Guthrie's favorite diversions," Una said. "You've just made a friend for life, Bridget."

After a brief but enjoyable visit, Shoney kissed Una and said goodnight to Guthrie. She was anxious to return to her borrowed hut, hopeful Ronan already waited for her. With every step that drew her closer, her unrest grew. Events unfolding beyond Mull ensured that on the morrow she returned to her true home and cast off the mantle of Bridget MacLeod, and Ronan would set sail on a quest to defend his king and country, but tomorrow had yet to come. Tonight would be theirs.

She raced the last of the pathway to her hut and swung open the door with anticipation, but inside she found only shadow.

She rekindled her fire and warmed some bannock and leftover porridge. Her disappointment combined with exhaustion made her suddenly long for sleep, but she finished her supper and sat in wait for his coming. Fatigue fought to claim her as she lay her head down upon the roughhewn wood of the table. As her eyes fluttered heavy with sleep a white light flashed in her mind's eye, and she was lost to a vision. With a start, she came to and released a sob that wracked her body. Her vision had shown a future so bleak it caused her to retch her meager dinner.

When at last she was able to compose herself, she stood and quickly donned her cloak. Then she opened the door and saying a prayer to Skatha to send her courage against the shadows, she rushed into the night. She stole through the village toward Dun Ara Castle, thankfully passing no one along the way. Everyone else was sound asleep after the day of exhaustive labor. She passed through the open gate into the courtyard and dashed up to the keep but the door was locked. Then she remembered the side entrance Morna had led them through on the morning of Anwen's recovery. She raced around the keep and sighed with relief as she pushed open the door.

The muted sconces in the great hall scarcely illuminated the two winding staircases. One she knew led to the chieftain's quarters. Dread gripped her as she imagined meeting Nathair. She remembered the burning hatred enflaming his amber eyes as he stalked her with murderous intent. Shivering, she pushed the image from her mind. She thankfully had not laid eyes on him since that first morning, and she could only hope she never saw him again.

The narrow stone steps wound around and around until they deposited her on a short landing in front of what she prayed was the

right door. Closing her eyes, she raised her hand to knock, but her knuckles only grazed the wood as the door flew open, and she was yanked against a wide chest with a knife to her throat.

"Shoney?"

She recognized Ronan's voice and sighed with relief. "Aye, who did you think it was, King Haakon?" she replied.

"Forgive me, Shoney, but I heard someone skulking up the stairs, and I grew suspicious."

"I was not skulking," she reproached. "I was merely trying to not draw attention to myself. What would Morna think if she knew I'd come to your rooms."

"At this moment, I could not care less about what Morna thinks."

He smiled and pulled her into his arms, lifting her off the ground as his lips slowly lowered to hers. She groaned into his mouth as her arms encircled his neck. She hungrily returned his kiss. It had been so long since he had held her, too long. His tongue swept inside her mouth, igniting a fire deep within.

"Why have you stayed away?" she whispered. "I know we fought, but…"

"I did not want you to leave," he interrupted. "You are stubborn, Shoney. Even if you wished to stay for a while, you would have said goodbye if I gave you the chance. I stayed away to keep you in the village."

One arm came behind her thighs, and she was swept into his arms. He carried her across the room, his lips never leaving hers. Only when he laid her on his pallet did his kiss end. Orange embers crackled in the hearth as he turned to rekindle the fire. His golden brown hair fell on broad shoulders, and the thick muscles of his arms shifted as he stabbed the cinders with the iron. When he turned, his eyes bore into hers, heavy with desire. He knelt in front of her, and his features lightened as his lips slowly curved to one side.

"I knew you would come to me," he said. She reached up and stroked his forearm.

"Having now seen a fair share of men up close, I now know what I have always suspected," she said.

"Aye, and what is that, lass?"

"That you are finer made than most." Her fingers caressed the hardness of his chest, making a trail down the ridged muscle of his abdomen.

"The Mother of all cut your form from the strongest stone, and Taranis, the god of thunder, filled your eyes with lightening so they would glow amber with passion when it suited you and fire when you swung your sword."

His sword.

How could she forget her vision? His hold was too great on her heart. It emptied her mind and filled her body with an unquenchable fire.

"Oh Ronan," she cried, "you stir my body and make my mind numb —I forgot my reason for coming."

He came over her then, covering her body with his hard warmth. "I know, my love. It has been too long, but do not worry as I have forgotten nothing. I know every luscious curve and every sweet smell." His hand found the edge of her tunic, and he began to push it past her knees.

She grabbed his hand, trying to keep her clothing in place. "No, Ronan. You don't understand. I came here to ask you to run away with me." He froze as the smile left his face.

"Shoney, not now," he groaned. "Not again. I cannot leave my clan, nor can I abandon my duties."

He stood up and walked to the window. Then he turned to face her again. "Don't you understand, Shoney? I would have no honor. I would no longer be the man you love."

"You will be dead."

"What?"

"You will die, Ronan. I have seen it." He turned away from her, but she continued. "You will march with your men to Largs, and there will be a battle. Storms will rage, casting the land in darkness for many days. Then the clouds will break, and the sun will stream down upon your back and ignite your hair like amber flames as you stand on a great precipice. The enemy will ascend from all sides, their blades gleaming in the sunlight. You fight with valor, but you will be overrun, and they will cut you down."

He closed the distance between them. His eyes were torches lit with anger.

"Why do you tell me this when you know I must go?"

"Did you not hear what I said, Ronan. You will die."

She took his hands and pulled him toward the door. "Please, Ronan, come away with me," she implored. "You can escape your fate."

"Shoney, if I run, I am dead."

He ran his hand through his hair in agitation. "My men will march, and they look to me to lead."

She desperately searched her mind for some way to convince him to stay behind. He must not die. They were destined to live apart; this much she knew. Neither could bend to meet the other without losing too much of what made them who they were, but to breathe life into her body knowing his was cold was profoundly unthinkable.

"Ronan, there must be a way. If I but think for a moment longer,

the solution will come to me." Panic was taking hold of her. "Ronan, I cannot live in this world, knowing you are gone."

He put his arms around her waist. "Shoney, hush and listen to me. Stay here with my clan as Bridget MacLeod. I will return, and we will make our life together."

"Stop it, Ronan. This argument no longer has any meaning. Our battle ends without a victor. Regardless, of my name, you will go, and you will die. Don't you see? We have no future about which to argue."

He pushed her from him. "You put too much faith in your visions and none in me."

He leaned with both hands on a large table littered with his various belongings. His sporran was packed and ready. His polished dirk and sheath lay side by side near a mug of ale and several unlit candle stubs. His shoulders flexed in agitation. Then, in one swift movement, he scattered the table's contents across the room and turned to face her.

"I will return, Shoney. You will not escape me so easily," he growled.

Never had he appeared wilder. He moved toward her with predatory intent. His eyes promised danger, causing the hairs on the back of her neck to stand up. She thought to make a run for it, but he stood between her and the only way out.

"You cannot run from me anymore, Shoney. You came to my rooms, and you are not leaving tonight until I have your word that you will remain in the village while I'm gone."

Shoney lifted her chin in defiance. No Scotsman was going to order her around, not even the one she loved.

"Never," she said, "now let me pass."

"Not until I have my promise," he smirked as he walked toward her.

His movements were measured and deft like a shark searching for prey in the shallows. She scurried back until she felt the cold stone wall behind her, at which point she knew there was nowhere else to go. Panic began to set in as she watched his approach. He moved slowly. The heat of his gaze seemed to burn where it touched. He was so close now. She could not breathe as he took the last slow step that brought her face within inches of his chest. She could not guess at what would come next, but she did not have long to wonder.

He took hold of her hand and slowly pushed it behind her back. Then he grabbed the other. His smile held a wicked gleam as he lifted her feet off the ground and laid her on the table. She tried to shuffle off the side to freedom, but he held her in place with one hand. Then he bent to the ground and grabbed hold of a length of plaid. She knew what he intended and would be damned if she would let him tie her

down without a fight. She twisted and kicked out with all her might. Her foot caught his chin, and his head snapped back, but he only smirked in response as he held her down and tied her arms. Then with another plaid, he trapped her legs at the ankles.

"You are mad, Ronan." She struggled against the knots, but they only seemed to tighten with her efforts.

"No, not mad, my dear," he whispered in her ear, "but I am done playing fair. I am going to take what I want." Then he seized her tunic at the neck and tore it asunder and threw the pieces on the floor. Her kirtle soon followed.

"You bastard," she screamed. "All you Scotsmen know how to do is cheat and steal," she spat.

"Not true," he grinned as his lips lowered to her shoulders. They grazed her skin, and the warmth of his breath caused her to tremble. "We have other talents."

"Och, may Fionn seize you and tear your limbs apart." She thrashed against her bindings. Already her body betrayed her. She could feel wondrous heat building inside of her, but she would fight against the hunger.

"I enjoy watching your breasts move as you struggle." His hand cupped and squeezed first one then the other.

"They tempt me to discard my plan and take you now," he said.

"You will not," she snarled.

Then he climbed onto the table and hovered over her. He made a trail of wet kisses across her stomach. He looked up at her with a lazy grin. "Eventually, I will. But, first, I look forward to hearing my promise on your lips."

"Never," she hissed. How dare he seek to break her—to bend her will.

"I yield to no one," she declared.

Once again, his lips set in an arrogant grin.

"Have it your way, my darling," he whispered.

Then his mouth set to work enflaming her body with bittersweet desire. She swallowed groans that crept to her lips as the interplay of tongue and stroking touch kindled an undeniable flame deep within. She pulled against the restraints. She had to fight, to break free. She refused to surrender to the command of his caress. Another fire ignited inside her, but this one was a rage that seared her soul and drove her to hate him. With every tremor of desire coursing through her body, the hatred grew until she was filled with contrasting emotions struggling for supremacy.

Again she pulled at her restraints and shrieked with pain and fury as she felt the bindings tighten.

"I hate you," she shouted.

“Hate me, Shoney. All I ask is that you do so here in the village. If you give me your word, then I will release you.”

Her back craved to bend and arch so that she might press into his touch, but despite the hunger spreading into the far recesses of her limbs, she resisted. He moved lower. He continued to tease as his lips traveled to the flat of her stomach. His tongue dipped into her navel, but then he continued to move down.

She looked away as his warm breath hit between her thighs. Her head was spinning. Like a whisper, his tongue swept over her, and she inhaled sharply. His touch was barely perceptible, but it created surging waves of heat, which coursed through her, demanding her surrender. His kiss deepened as he tantalized her most intimate places, causing her agonizing pleasure. She cried out with both alarm and ravenous desire. She bucked her hips to escape the languorous touch of his tongue, but he held her still and stroked her with wet heat. She moaned aloud—she could no longer control herself. She ached and throbbed and writhed beneath his touch. She was losing herself to the sweet agony of his kiss when suddenly he stopped.

“Ronan,” she cried.

“Let me hear the words,” he whispered.

“Ronan, please.” She twisted beneath him, trying to close her legs, but he pressed open her thighs, spreading them apart.

“Promise me,” he said.

She bit her lip as she tried to resist. His lips descended once more as he grazed her with a faint kiss. She pressed her hips into him, her body seeking the relief it craved. He lavished her with his tongue, causing her to quake and tremble. Then again he pulled away.

“Say it, Shoney.”

“I will not,” she cried.

Once again, she quivered at his touch. Then once again it was gone.

“Ronan, please.”

“Promise me you will stay, and I will ease your body.”

She was overcome with desire. She wanted to scream. She wanted to weep. She needed relief, but she could not bear to yield. She felt hot tears course down her cheeks as he once again set fire to her body. She shuddered as the yearning within her throbbed until it was all she could feel, and she could no longer fight her hunger.

“I promise,” she cried.

His body sagged on top of her for a moment as he loudly exhaled. Then he reached up and tore away the bindings from her hands and freed her legs. Her arms swept around his neck, and she cried out with relief as he swiftly took her. Her hips pounded against his as she sought release from the agony that gripped her. With each stroke, the searing heat spread until it was almost unbearable. Then finally her

body succumbed as she clung to him. She shuddered with release as rapture tore through her, leaving her quivering and quaking in his arms.

Chapter 22

A morning of farewells and of tears, unfolded before Ronan as he watched his men comfort their wives and children. Maids gave Aidan and the other unmarried men flowers for luck, and they blushed when they received kisses in return. He sat stiffly on his horse, gripping the reins, his knuckles white from the strain. Maids approached his side, but then scattered when they noticed the deep scowl furrowing his brow. He paid them little heed. It was Shoney who interested him.

He stared at her over the sea of villagers. She warmly returned the greetings of warriors as they passed, and Ronan saw her flash Aidan a brilliant smile, but she did not spare him a glance. Her stance was as strong and enduring as the cliffs, but her true feelings were revealed by her hands, which, like his, were bound in tight fists.

The devil take her anger.

He invited her fury last night, and he certainly didn't blame her for being vexed with him. He deserved her loathing, but he did not care. He had what he wanted: her promise to stay on in the village as Bridget. There would be time for him to soothe her temper and make amends when he returned—if he returned.

He shook his head. He did not doubt the power of Shoney's gift, but he never put much stock in prayer, and he did not think visions differed so greatly. He believed men made their own destiny.

"The hour grows late," The Mackinnon shouted. "Clan MacKinnon, our king fights to defend the sovereignty of all Western Isles against the tyranny of King Haakon." The clan cheered in response.

"For Mull and for Scotland, we go to war," the MacKinnon cried. Then he turned and looked to Ronan.

Raising his sword high in the air, Ronan sounded the battle cry of the clan, "Remember the Death of King Alpin."

Then, as if one body, the warriors reached behind their backs, withdrew their swords in unison and repeated the cry with a deafening roar, "Remember the Death of King Alpin."

"To the ships, lads," The Mackinnon ordered.

The men mounted their horses and started toward the docks. Ronan rode alongside Aidan, his mind on the journey ahead, but he chanced one last glance at Shoney.

"God's blood," he swore. Her face had crumbled.

He spun his horse around and rode back through the lines of mounted warriors and the throng of villagers. He stopped directly in front of where she stood, leaned down and scooped her into his arms.

"I will return," he whispered.

Then he kissed her long and hard and groaned as she dug her

fingers into his flesh and pulled their bodies closer. As he pulled back, he gave her a lazy smile.

"Well," he said, "our secret is out now."

"Not entirely," she reminded him.

"You are my pagan queen, Shoney," he whispered.

She stared at him as silent tears fell. Her eyes reflected the ache in her heart, and Ronan knew her vision was to blame. She already mourned his death.

"Shoney," he whispered into her ear, "I will return."

Then he smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes. "I would not rob you of your chance to punish me for last night's cruel manipulation." Straightaway, the hot fire he craved returned to her gaze.

"That's right, Shoney. Stay angry with me. Your anger will fuel your strength."

He kissed her again and deposited her back on the ground as the clan erupted into a new chorus of cheers, celebrating their kiss. The warriors also cheered as he rejoined their ranks, all but his father whose lips formed a grim line.

"You have made your choice then," Nathair said.

"Aye, father. My choice not yours," Ronan rejoined.

The MacKinnon shrugged, "The matter is no longer of importance… for now," he warned.

Shoney watched as the men disappeared over the ridge. The quickest route to Largs was to sail south down the Sound of Mull, through the ocean around the mainland, and into the Firth of Clyde, but that would send them straight into the heart of the Norse fleet. Instead, they would sail north to Loch Linnhe where they would dock on the mainland, and then complete the forty league journey to Largs on foot. Morna said the journey would take most of a fortnight. They should arrive just as autumn took hold of the land and sea. Then war would begin, and Ronan would die.

Shoney choked on sobs aching for release. She was brimming with anger and sorrow. Ronan's manipulation of her body to secure his will left her feeling hurt and betrayed, but she was also grief stricken, knowing she would never see him again. Her head began to spin, and for once in her life, she craved solitude, but everywhere she turned people stood nearby.

"Bridget, my girl, come here." Morna took Shoney in her arms and stroked her hair. "Hush, do not fret, dear. He will return."

"Mayhap," Shoney whispered as tears coursed down her cheeks.

"His fate is in his own hands, Bridget, and no one's hands could be stronger or more capable than Ronan's. He will return to you," she said, and then she smiled. "Now aren't you one for surprises. No one

knew you were sweet on each other," she winked. "Now wipe your eyes. There's work that needs doing."

Shoney did as she was told. Morna's faith in Ronan's return gave her hope. Mayhap Morna and Ronan were right. Perhaps, ultimately, everyone determined their own fate. She would fight to fill her heart with faith rather than despair. And to keep her mind from visiting dark places, she reconciled to throw herself into work. She wiped her eyes, tossed her long braid off her shoulder and straightened the belt around her borrowed green tunic.

"Alright, Morna," she said, "I am ready. Put me to work."

"That's my brave girl," Morna said, smiling.

As they walked back to the village, Shoney counted twenty men walking toward the training fields.

"Why did so many warriors stay behind?" she asked.

"To guard against an attack from the south, of course. The MacLeans are just the sort to wait until only women and children stand between their thieving hearts and our full stores. The tall one there with red hair is Bhaltair. He is in command of the warriors while the others are away."

"But women can defend their homes the same as men," Shoney said.

"Oh, bless me. Bridget, the last time I took up a bow was never. The MacLeans are no match for our lads, but they are still trained warriors. 'Tis best if the fighting is left to the men."

"Why did the MacLean not answer the call of the king," Shoney asked.

"Their loyalty lies where the least risk waits. If they thought the Norse would win, they likely would have backed King Haakon. They have chosen not to put their oar in with either King. Angus MacLean must not like the odds either way. They are cowards devoted to nothing and loyal to no one. 'Tis wicked to castoff ones heritage so easily."

Shoney dropped her head. Morna's words shamed her. What would her mother think of her now? She was Bridget MacLeod, traitor to her birth and faith, deserter of her heritage.

Mother of all, her life was conflicted; she no longer knew what was right and good.

"Hurry now, Bridget. The bolls on the flax have turned brown. 'Tis time we start the harvest."

Shoney sped along to keep up with Morna. Perhaps she would find the answers she sought in toil, and if not, at least it would provide a distraction.

"Bridget," someone shouted. She looked to see who called. It was the small lad who had teased Shoney and Una about the burnt

bannock.

"'Tis mum," he huffed. "The baby is on the way."

"Morna, I have been taught much about childbirth, and I know many remedies for complications, but I have never myself even witnessed a birth."

"You are always one for surprises, Bridget." Morna chuckled. "Whoever heard of a healer that never attended a birth?" Then she turned to the lad. "Come along. Take us to your mum."

"Push now, Una. Push with all your might."

It seemed to Shoney the Mother of all had heard her prayer—she found little time to think over the past several weeks. She delivered two babies since Ronan's departure, and she was in the midst of a third, but this little one was resisting her entry into the world. Shoney was growing increasingly concerned over the well-being of the child and her mother.

"Morna, she is bleeding out, and I cannot stop it. We must help her push, or she will not survive."

Shoney threw aside a pile of rags soaked with blood. "Morna come here to catch the child. Anwen you and I must massage her abdomen." Shoney moved to kneel beside Una's bulging belly.

"Lay your hands flat right here beneath her chest, and massage in a downward motion, applying pressure as you go. Increase the pressure when her pains come again."

As Shoney rubbed, she called to Una so that she might hear her through the mire of pain and fatigue.

"You must push with us, Una. Push."

"I see its head. He is coming," Morna cried.

"Did you hear that, Una? Your baby is coming." Shoney said. Then she turned to Anwen, "As soon as her next pain begins, start again and do not stop applying pressure until the babe arrives." Anwen nodded. Just then, Una started to writhe against a fresh pain.

"Now," Shoney cried.

She leaned into Una's abdomen, firmly stroking down over and over again. She heard the struggles of the other women as they strained in unison.

"That's it, Una. That's it. Oh, Bridget, he is coming," Morna exclaimed.

Shoney groaned from the strain, and then suddenly the tension in Una's abdomen released. Shoney burst into tears as she saw the babe spill forth into Morna's awaiting arms.

"He has arrived," Morna cried. "You did it, Una. At long last, he is here." Soon the wailing cry of the new babe filled the hut, but Shoney did not look up. Una's life was still in jeopardy.

“Anwen bring more clean rags and some dried quickgrass and mugwort oil. Mix the two into a thick salve, and be quick. I will need it the moment Una releases the birthing sac.” Una managed one more push at Shoney’s request, and the sac slid from her body.

“Quickly, Morna, pass the nettle brew from the table.” Shoney poured the contents over Una’s swollen flesh, “It will ward off infection.”

“Here is the salve, Bridget.” Anwen handed her a small dish. Shoney scooped the paste and smeared where Una’s skin was torn. Shoney looked up to see Morna place the swaddled baby in her mother’s arms.

Una smiled weakly. “He is so beautiful. Is he not, Morna?”

“Aye, Una, surely he is the sweetest babe I have ever seen.”

Shoney moved to kneel on Una’s other side and felt her forehead.

“He is perfect,” Shoney said, “but you are a little warm, love. I will brew a tea to cool your fever. But first drink this broth. You must eat for your milk to come.”

Una grabbed hold of Shoney’s hand and brought it to her lips. “I will call him Guthrie, but had I bore a baby girl I would have called her Bridget. Truly you are an angel sent from heaven. God bless you. And dear Morna and Anwen,” Una turned to the other women, “May all the saints and angels bless your hearts.”

Shoney smiled and kissed her dear friend’s cheek, “Let little Guthrie suckle, and then you must rest.”

“You should also rest, Bridget.” Morna said. “I will sit with her a while.”

“And you, Morna, do you ever sleep?” Shoney asked.

“Don’t you fret about me, Bridget. There will be plenty of time for me to rest in the hereafter.” Morna pressed a kiss to Shoney’s forehead. “Go on dear, you seem pale to me.”

“I am feeling a little lightheaded. Thank you, Morna. Fetch me if her fever worsens.”

Shoney awoke to find her hut cloaked in darkness. She wondered how long she slept. She still did not feel altogether well. Pulling herself to her feet, she trudged across the ground and out the door. The village was quiet. It must have been the middle of the night.

She needed to eat something, but the idea of food made her stomach twist. Toiling day in and day out for weeks had finally taken its toll. Every day she labored with the other women to prepare for the harvest. Each day also brought new injuries and ailments. When Shoney returned in the evening to her hut, there seemed to always be someone awaiting her healing touch. It was no wonder she was exhausted. Una’s labor drained what little energy she had left, but

even still, she had not actually given birth herself—it was Una alone who deserved to be so weary. Worry for Una and little Guthrie distracted her as she wondered whether they rested soundly.

Remembering Una's brush with death caused Shoney to shudder as she imagined Gribun without her beloved friend's quick laughter and constant strength. She could not love Una anymore if she had been her birth sister, and to think she would have named her baby Bridget if it had been a little girl. Shoney groaned aloud with shame. Lies, lies, and more lies—such was the foundation of her newfound friendships.

A wave of nausea gripped her; she took deep breaths until the feeling passed. She looked to the moon for comfort, but the sight caused her to inhale sharply. It was full like a woman ripe with child.

"Mother of all," Shoney cried as her arms crossed and encircled her waist. She missed her cycle but had been too busy to notice. She tried to remember back to her last bleeding, but she could not say for sure, which meant only one thing.

She turned back inside, closed the door, sunk to the ground, and sobbed. In her womb grew a babe, a babe whose mother was a fraud and whose father was fated to die.

Chapter 23

Ronan's chest heaved, and his heart pounded in his ears. They set out every morning before the first light of dawn, pounding the earth with their leather clad feet as they tore through wooded path and open road and did not cease until the moon rose high in the sky. When they needed food, they stopped only under the veil of forest canopy and filled their bellies, gulping down the dried herring and crusty bannock, prepared by the women they loved and sought to defend. Holes intentionally lined their shoes, allowing the water to drain and their feet eventually to dry so they could stay their course, heedless of streams or rivers.

At the king's command, Ronan and his father formed two bands of warriors and took separate paths to conceal their numbers from enemy scouts. The land was alive with the threat of war. The flash of tartan could be seen darting through every wood they entered. On several occasions, they met bands of warriors from other clans including the MacDonalds, the Fergusons, and the MacLeods. Ronan cringed when Guthrie asked the MacLeod chieftain if he knew a healer named Bridget, but Guthrie did not press the issue when the chieftain shook his head. The MacLeods had many territories and clans. Besides, every man had only one thought—war. They were almost to Largs and eager for battle, but they were careful to remember the king's order to travel in small groups. They greeted each other, and then went their separate ways.

Near the outskirts of Largs, they remained inland to avoid being spotted by the Norse sailors whose ships were anchored in the Firth of Clyde. Standing beneath the vibrant canopy of the forest, Ronan admired the rainbow of colors; autumn had arrived. His nostrils were assailed by the scent of wet earth and rotting leaves. Soon, the winds would blow and churn the now peaceful waters of the Firth, and the skies would open, unleashing a fury of seasonal storms that would wreak havoc upon the Norse fleet.

The moon rose high, and the forest creaked with the rhythmic sounds of nightfall. They would sleep for a few hours and then advance into Largs at first light. Ronan sat beside Aidan who was chewing on some dried herring.

"We have done well, Aidan, arriving sooner than expected."

"Aye, and my aching feet can testify to that."

"You whine like an old woman," Ronan grinned.

"I've never known an old woman who could match complaints with Aidan," Dugald said.

Guthrie slapped Aidan on the back. "Aye, my ol' granny would be

mighty offended by that comparison."

"His feet are as soft as lambskin, I'd wager, just like his face," Dugald added with a wink.

Aidan smiled good-naturedly, "I pray the good Lord looks upon me with mercy and guides a Norse blade across my cheek to give me a fearsome scar, forever marring this mug of mine. That is, before I take the Norse fiend's head clear off his body."

"He could take your nose clear off, and you would still look like a maid," Guthrie laughed merrily.

"Do not tempt the Lord's wrath, Aidan," Ronan scolded. "Like the rest of us, you are no stranger to sin. Instead, pray the Norse blades are blunt." Ronan took a swig of ale and passed Aidan the jug.

"Rest now, lads. Tomorrow, we make for Largs."

Ronan lay down, pulling his plaid around his shoulders. When they were on the move, his mind was on the journey ahead and the threat that awaited them, but at night, when his men slept and his eyes closed, he thought only of Shoney. He wondered if she kept her promise, or if she had already returned to her hut, once again donning the cloak of the Witch of Dervaig. He hoped she stayed and was happy.

It was overwhelming at times, the hurt that gripped his heart if ever he pictured her drowning in the solitude he had pulled her from. Suddenly, his own life was a trifling; something he would gladly trade to ensure her well-being. That is, if his life was his own to trade, but even that mattered little now. He no longer doubted their future together. He would fight his father, and he would fight her for that matter, and he would win.

He looked into the trees and saw her there, staring down at him, her golden hair disheveled, swinging like gilded ropes in the breeze. Stormy eyes, heavy with passion stared into his as she chewed on her bottom lip, trying to resist him, trying not to love him, but it was a fight she always lost. She stretched her arms into the night air as she reached for him. He heard his name float from her lips as she slowly drifted down with the heat of longing in her eyes.

But then, one of his men snorted and shifted in his sleep, forcing Ronan to concede to reality. Shoney's image disappeared, and once again, they seemed a world apart, surrounded by uncertainty.

At first light, Ronan awoke, ready to embark with his men. The air was heavy as they strode into Largs, and the sky overhead was overcast. Despite the warnings of foul weather, the town was bustling with preparations for the upcoming battle. The thriving and growing community was bursting at the seams with the arrival of so many highland warriors. Ronan led his men through the streets toward the church in the village center where he and Nathair had agreed to meet.

The Mull MacKinnons, awaiting his arrival in the courtyard, passed on the laird's command for Ronan to meet him in the high stone tower above the rectory.

"Taking in the view?" Ronan shouted up to his father. Nathair grinned and motioned for Ronan to join.

Ronan, followed by both Aidan and Guthrie, ducked through a doorway into the priestly quarters. His eyes were still adjusting to the dimly lit and sparsely furnished room when he was approached by an ancient clergyman who did not speak but gestured for them to follow. He led them to the rear of the building and pulled back a dark, heavy curtain, which hid a narrow stairwell from view. Ronan thanked him as he mounted the stairs.

"How old do you reckon he was?" Guthrie said.

"Not as old as you think," Aidan snorted. "That is what happens to a man when he is denied sunlight and a woman's touch."

"Again Aidan, you know I am not the holiest of men, but for the love of God, do not tempt the Lord's wrath on the eve of battle." Ronan admonished. "Be silent and do not offend."

Nathair greeted them at the top with a wide grin on his face. "We have arrived not a day too soon, men. Look to the West." Ronan gazed out to sea and in the distance saw the gathering threat of storm clouds.

"Aye, it won't be long," Ronan said.

"Those clouds are as black as my Una's eyes," Guthrie said as he touched the lock of black hair Ronan noticed was tied to his belt.

"Aye," Aidan agreed, "but not nearly as sweet."

Guthrie snorted and grabbed a fistful of Aidan's plaid, "Aidan MacKinnon, you strutting cock, you stay clear from my Una."

Ronan pushed himself between the two and shoved Guthrie against the tower wall. "Save your fury for the Norse, Guthrie. Una's sweetness is known to all. Aidan meant nothing." Guthrie muttered an apology but glared at Aidan as he stomped down the stairwell.

"They are like a pack of hounds hungry for the hunt," Nathair said under his breath.

"Aye," Ronan agreed as he stared out the tower casement. The Firth of Clyde stretched out before them, teeming with long ships.

"Look, already the winds stir the waves," Ronan said.

"Right now every captain is running his men ragged trying to ready their ships for the storm," Nathair grinned, "but nothing will save them from the hell about to be unleashed."

As if summoned forth by the MacKinnon's words, a crack of thunder shook the ground and a flash of lightening spread its fiery fingers across the sky. The black clouds twisted and spread, casting the firth in shadow as the winds thrashed the heavens and lashed out

at the seas.

"The storm arrives earlier than predicted," Ronan shouted over the wind.

"Aye, it will not be long now. Then we will have to take our position on the coast," Nathair replied. Ronan glanced below and saw warriors from the lowlands who were part of the king's retainer donning their mail and helmets and preparing their bows.

"The king has ordered archers in place on the slope above the shoreline," Nathair said just as the rain began.

"Good," Ronan replied, "The pelt of rain and steel shall tumble from the heavens upon their heads, and they will wish they never set sail for Scottish waters."

He leaned out the window and closed his eyes, turning his face toward the blackening sky. Rain poured down, washing over him, and for a moment he imagined Mull and the soft harvest moon.

"For Mull," he muttered as the last light of day was blotted out by the storm's nightmarish expanse, and it was as though night.

Thunder clapped as Ronan shouted, "How many warriors have gathered, Father?"

"There is a cavalry of a hundred heavily armed men and twice as many archers," Nathair answered, "and the infantry is greater than a thousand strong."

"I counted over one hundred ships. King Haakon has more than twice as many men," Ronan said.

"He will not have so many by the time he reaches the coast," Nathair grinned.

"Aye, Father, but even with the help of the storm, we still face a formidable army."

"I reckon so, lad, but I would not have made such a journey if I thought my blade would not shine red with Norse blood."

Ronan reached behind his back, pulling his blade from its sheath. "Mackinnon," he shouted down to his men, "Remember the Death of King Alpin."

Once on the ground, his men sounded their battle cry again, and as they raced the short distance to the coast, Ronan heard the battle cries of other clans. Already the ground beneath his feet oozed with thick mud, and the rain pelted his back. The sky above the tumultuous waters was black pitch and writhed with terrific life. Ronan watched as the waves emerged like cloaked demons from the very depths of the seas. Watery tentacles as sharp as blades cut through the Norse fleet, tearing ships asunder.

The same waves rushed toward land, pounding the shoreline and eroding the sloping earth. Ronan stood in the midst of Scotland's finest warriors who were primed for battle and standing at the ready

up and down the coastline. The Firth stretched out before him. He and his warriors silently beheld the magnificent power of the tempest, their bearing as unwavering as their conviction that Scotland was their sovereign. But many of the men around them were anything but silent. Their long wet hair clung to their faces in wild disarray as they cheered with triumphant bloodlust. Swords were unsheathed and held high at the ready as the dead of the enemy could be seen tossed upon the waves. The sea hurled them toward the coast, and the bodies that still breathed life would be cut where they lay by a highland blade.

The Norse vessels were no match for the merciless force of the wind and the thrashing of the waves. The sea battered the ships, and in the face of the mounting carnage, Ronan knew the captains would soon be forced to head toward the coast and take their chances against the awaiting army. As the ships grew closer, Ronan could see the warriors standing at the ready. With the exception of the captains, they wore no armor over their brightly colored tunics and most were armed only with shield and axe.

A whistling sound could be heard over the din of the storm, and he turned around to see the archers in formation further up the slope release another volley of arrows. The sky was thick with iron headed shafts, and although many were swept away by the winds, just as many found their targets as Ronan watched the slain Norse fighters fall into the churning sea.

Menacing fanged dragons swam into view, carved into the bows of the Viking ships. They drew closer as powerful winds thrust the boats forward, driving their shallow drafts up onto the shore. The beasts were a weapon of fear used against Scottish innocents only months before. The sight fueled Ronan's hunger for justice as he imagined terrified children running from the monsters. The sound of cracking timber was deafening as the gale-force winds smashed the ships together at the feet of the highland warriors, but the Norsemen were far from defeated.

They lunged from their vessels, treading on the bodies of their brothers, with madness in their eyes and hatred in their hearts. Their blades were at the ready, and they struck with the strength of those who escaped certain death and now had nothing to lose. Every warrior that charged at Ronan held the gleam of revenge in their eyes. Their battle was no longer about individual riches and land for their king. They craved retribution against the storm that laid waste to their fleet and to the enemy that stood by and cheered their demise.

In the beginning, the seasonal squall was an ally to the Scotsmen, the frontline of their assault. But as the Norse fighters spilled out of their long ships and moved beyond the coast, both sides struggled to hold a firm stance against the wind as they moved over slippery stones

and were pulled into thick torrents of mud. The enemy was fierce, but their motives lacked principle; whereas, the Highlanders fought for the sovereignty of their land and the protection of their families. Their virtue was an added advantage against the Viking axe and shield, and Ronan held fast to his conviction as he swung his blade with speed and precision, cutting down foe after foe.

Hours passed into what must have been nightfall and then morning, but the sky never released the sun or stars by which to distinguish one day from the next. Ronan's mind had become as black as the sky that hammered an unrelenting onslaught of rain upon his back. He no longer heard the death cries of the Norse who crumbled at his feet, nor did he feel fatigue or hunger. He barely perceived the flood of mire and blood through which he trudged. He did not see the faces of his friends or his enemies. He only discerned movement and whether to kill or not to kill.

He climbed atop a high rock formation, slicing his sword through the bellies of the men who gave chase. When he reached the top and stared out across the gruesome expanse, stretching out beneath his chosen precipice, his mind grew keen as if he had awoken from a dark dream, but what he saw could never be conceived even in the foulest nightmare.

The ground was strewn with the wasting bodies of the dead, many of whom were draped in the varied colors of the Scottish plaid. Wounded men from both sides dragged their bleeding bodies over the soulless carcasses and through the thick mud. Ronan turned his head toward the sky and felt the wash of rain pour down his face. All at once, Fatigue clouded his mind and weighed down his bones until he felt as though he might collapse.

But then something wondrous touched his face.

Fingers of warmth spread over his cheeks. He opened his eyes and gazed at a ray of sunshine, pushing its way through the gloom. Golden cascades of light mingled with dark clouds, summoning memories of Shoney's sun-kissed waves and stormy eyes. It felt as if several lifetimes had passed since he last thought of her, and then he froze as he remembered Shoney's words:

Storms will rage, casting the land in darkness. Then the clouds will break, and the sun will stream down upon you as you stand on a great precipice.

"God's blood," he swore. Her vision was coming true.

Chapter 24

"Sweet Jesus above, what ails you, Bridget?" Shoney lifted her head from her sick pan to look through bleary eyes at Morna.

"Good Morning, Morna," Shoney muttered.

"Not good at all, it would seem." Morna knelt down and swept Shoney's hair back from her face. "You look green, my dear, and you're as warm as an egg plucked out from under a hen."

"'Tis nothing, Morna. I must have eaten something that soured my stomach." Shoney began to stand but stopped as another wave of nausea sent her reaching for the pan. Morna soothed her back. "There, there, Bridget. You will feel better once you get it all up."

Shoney groaned as she fell back on her pallet. If only it were that simple.

"I'm sure with a little rest, I will be fine," she said.

"Aye, to be sure, Bridget. Still, I plan to keep an eye on you today." Morna pulled Shoney's blankets beneath her chin.

"Rest for now, and I will be back in just a little while to check on you." She placed a kiss on Shoney's brow, and then she was gone, leaving Shoney alone with the overwhelming madness of her thoughts.

She was drowning in desolation, and despite how she tried, she could not trudge through the mire of her thoughts to a place of peace. No longer could she discern where her true self ended and her alias began. She felt as much Bridget as she did Shoney. Her sense of self, tradition, and faith, given to her by her mother, were being stripped away, leaving her feeling weak and disloyal. Whether she should honor her mother and her heritage or Ronan was an unremitting battle that twisted her mind during the day and haunted her dreams at night.

Her mother was dead as was her past. Why should she cling to what had already come to pass when she could have a future together with Ronan, surrounded with family and friends, laughter and love? But then her throat closed, and she could not draw breath as her thoughts brought her back to that which she wanted most to forget—her vision.

Over and over again, she saw her love crumble as swords penetrated his body. Nevermore would she see his face, and never would he know his child. She sat up and retched again as her body was racked with sobs. She could not breathe. She could not think. She had to find peace from her fear or, surely, she would lose her baby. Then she imagined her little hut on the cliffs and knew she needed to go home.

She was careful to slip away from the village unseen as she cut through the forest and stepped out into open land. The autumn wind whistled over the moors, rushing through her hair and pulling at her tunic. The stark hills had lost summer's emerald hue, and the tangled patches of heather, which stretched their fingers over hill and jagged rock alike, had started to fade and wither. Shoney inhaled the crisp air, reveling in the wildness of the land.

When she finally glimpsed her hut and the cliffs beyond in the distance, she quickened her pace as a flutter of excitement pulsed through her. Soon, she was kneeling at the Dervaig Stones in the foreground of her home, hanging her head in reverence. She prayed to the Mother of all for guidance and for help understanding the mysteries of her heart. In that sacred place, she remained for some time, hoping to hear the soft croon of ancestral voices on the wind, but all she heard was the welcoming cries of the Black Backed gulls.

It was at the edge of the cliffs that she felt her strength return. The rich salty sea air assailed her nostrils, awakening her senses. The sharp winds rolling off the sea blasted her core with exhilaration, and her heart matched the pounding beat of the surf against the cliff side. She could not say why or how, but a peace settled over her then. Reaching her hands to the sky, she spun, laughing for the first time in days and days. The answers she sought were near. If she remained mindful and patient, she would find them. Smiling she turned from the sea and entered her home.

Her eyes welled with tears as she gazed about her quiet quarters. She could feel her mother's presence in the room. Warm memories floated around her, soothing the last of her fear away. She wrapped her arms around her belly, and for the first time, she spoke to her child, telling her that she was loved and welcome.

Everything was just as she left it, except for the dust. With gladness, Shoney went to work, opening the door and window to invite in fresh air and checking buckets outside for rainwater to use for washing. She started with her table, cleaning each earthen bowl and tool. She thought of how useful many of the salves and herbs would be to the village if she decided to return.

Would she return?

Could she really abandon her new home and her beloved friends? Life without them seemed hard to imagine, but she shook her head and let her fear drift away. Somehow she would know what to do. Next, she decided to gather her tunics and kirtles to shake outside. She pulled her clothing from their pegs, including her cloaks, but her hand froze when she reached for what hung on the final peg—the cloak of the Witch of Dervaig.

She dropped the bundle of clothing on the ground, and stared at the

cloak. Taking a deep breath, she reached a hesitant hand and warily pulled it off the peg. Overcome by the cloak's two opposing powers, her hands shook as she held it. The cloak was her greatest protection. By instilling fear into the minds of the villagers, it allowed her to move unharassed over the isle. It represented anonymity and freedom, but that was not all. The dark, tattered fabric was also a prison. It shackled her to life as an outcast and a life without Ronan.

The cloak seemed to sneer at her, mocking her new found resolve. She moved to the center of the room and fanned the fabric out, resting it on her shoulders. Pulling the hood down low over her brow, she hunched her back and limped across the floor. Her friends would scatter with terror if she hobbled into the village, but what would they do if she suddenly stood straight and
flung the cloak from her shoulders? It was too terrifying to consider.

"I knew I would find you here," said a voice.

Shoney whirled around, astonished to see Ronan's mother standing in the doorway, but Anwen did not seem in the least surprised to find her in the Witch's hut, wearing the Witch's cloak.

"How did you know?" Shoney uttered.

"Morna came to me in a panic, saying you were ill and missing. She is afraid you've come down with a fever and wandered off in your delirium," Anwen chuckled. "She has the whole clan searching for you. When I could, I slipped away."

Anwen reached toward Shoney and gently slid the hood back and swept the cloak from her shoulders.

"You see, Bridget, I knew just where to find you. From the moment I first laid eyes on you, I have known who you are," she smiled.

"And you are not afraid," Shoney whispered.

"Of you?" Anwen laughed. "My dear, who could ever be afraid of you?"

"Many people, otherwise you would not have come in secret."

"Perhaps," Anwen replied as she walked around the hut.

"How did you know?"

Anwen took hold of Shoney's hands and smiled warmly, "Let us sit together by the fire, and I will tell you a story."

Shoney sat across from Ronan's mother. Her hands were tight fists of anticipation as she waited for the elder woman's tale to begin.

"Many years ago now, when I was a young girl of six years, I wandered away from the village and into the woods. It was not long before I realized I was lost. Not knowing which direction to take, I sat on a fallen log and began to cry. It was then I heard a sweet little voice. I lifted my head and wiped my eyes and saw the prettiest little girl, the likes of which I thought only lived in dreams. She, no older than I, knelt before me and took my hands and told me not to cry. She

was going to save me. Her hair shone like spun gold, and her eyes were as grey as storm swept seas."

"It was my mother," Shoney said knowingly.

"You have the look of your mother. I believed that one of the fair folk had come to rescue me. She gave me berries to eat, and then we ran and played together for hours." Anwen closed her eyes. "I can still see her running ahead of me. Her golden hair bouncing and her strange eyes smiling as she looked back." Then she again met Shoney's gaze. "I always knew somehow when she was waiting for me. I'd make my way to the fallen log and there she would be."

The fire began to smoke. Shoney added another cut of peat to the flames as Anwen continued her story.

"For three summers we met, and then at the start of my tenth summer, I went to our spot, and it was empty, but I was not surprised. And, I will tell you this, Shoney—I knew, somehow, that she was not going to be waiting for me. More than that, I knew she would never wait for me again. My faery would never return."

"And?" Shoney urged.

"I told you. I never saw her again."

"Well, how did you know who she really was—that her mother was the Witch? Did she tell you?" Shoney asked.

"One day, I bade her show me where she lived. She led me along the coastal route here to her hut, but we hid outside. She told me her mother would be angry if she knew we were friends."

"And you were not afraid?" Shoney asked.

"Never—not even a little. I adored Brethia. She was a big sister to me even though we were the same age. I felt safe with her as though she would always protect me."

"Why do you think she stopped meeting you in the wood?"

Anwen smiled and put her hand on Shoney's knee. "We grew up, Bridget."

"You know," Shoney smiled shyly, "Bridget is not my real name."

"I thought not," she chuckled. "Well, out with it. Who are you then?"

"Shoney."

"Ah, she named you after the god of good fishing. I'm not surprised as your mother loved to fish and often prayed to Shoney. Yes, that does suit you much more."

Anwen leaned close and said, "When we are alone together you shall always be Shoney to me."

Shoney turned away. She knew Anwen meant well, but she felt betrayed nonetheless. Would she ever know acceptance?

"I'm sorry, Shoney. I have injured you, but you must understand that we are all of us part of the same world, and this world is not

always just. If it were otherwise, the men we love would not be out there right now fighting and risking all for our safety."

"You must think my concern for my name frivolous," Shoney began, "but I grieve for much more than that when I answer to the name Bridget."

Shoney looked beseechingly to Anwen for support. Surely, she, her mother's companion in youth, would understand.

"Aye, you feel as though you've brought shame to your mother. She gave you a strong name, and she taught you the ways of your people, ways which you reject by coming to the village."

"Precisely," Shoney began, but Anwen interrupted.

"Here me out, Shoney," she implored. "A mother's greatest desire for her child is life—to live. There are many villains that would slay a child and many ways for a heart to die. There is of course life stolen by war, disease, or accident, like my first son, Nachlan. But there is also death which comes when all joy is lost. In this case, the body may still breathe and move, but the heart is broken beyond repair. If you remain here, alone, under the darkness of your cloak, your heart will die. I know this, Shoney. I have watched you grow in joy since your arrival even though I know you have often been unhappy, but there is a difference. Joy is what sustains even when despair sets in."

"I have found great joy, first Ronan and then the people of Gribun, you and Morna and Una. You all have come to mean so much to me. I feel loved and necessary, two things impossible to find in solitude, but…," she trailed off, not wishing to acknowledge her fear.

"But what, Shoney?" Anwen implored.

"I am a fraud."

"But that is not true. Your affection is genuine, and your help very real. Deception is often necessary in life. Do not fool yourself into thinking truth is always the noblest pathway; sometimes it destroys more than it creates. Think of all the good you have done, all that you have made that would be undone." Anwen smiled slyly. "Think of the baby growing inside you."

Shoney inhaled sharply, once again surprised by Anwen's awareness.

"I have watched you closer than you think. My son loves you. He made that quite clear to everyone before he left." Her penetrating eyes bore into Shoney's as she searched for the truth.

"Your silence confirms my suspicion," she said.

"Aye, Ronan's child does grow inside me."

Anwen smiled and pulled her into a warm embrace.

"No, Please don't," Shoney pushed her away. "I have not decided where my future lies. Becoming Bridget is to surrender."

Shoney stood up and walked to the doorway and pointed to the

sacred stones. “All of the women who have come before me have worshiped at those stones. At some point, each woman would have been forced to decide—stay and be true to themselves, refusing your law and your religion, or leave, seeking out a new life. My mother refused to surrender. Now I am faced with that choice. If I leave, then I lay waste to all that my mother endured.”

“But where does it end, Shoney? Is your child to be raised in isolation, one day being left alone, faced with this impossible choice?”

Shoney’s mind was reeling. Anwen was right. Now that she was with child, it was not only her future she must consider. Her daughter, like Shoney, would find herself alone one day, faced with the same desolate isolation, assuming she had a daughter. What if she birthed a son? What kind of life would he know?

“Shoney, regardless of where you live and by what name you take,” Anwen began, “my delight is unwavering. You carry my grandchild and nothing can change that. But I have one question.”

“If I have an answer, it will be yours,” Shoney replied.

“Have you made any promises to Ronan?”

She blushed crimson with embarrassment and anger when she remembered their last night together. “Only to remain in the village until his return,” she said.

“Then on his behalf, I ask you honor this promise and return with me now.”

But what if he doesn’t return, her heart screamed.

She was dizzy and about to be sick again.

“Shoney, rest for a minute. ‘Tis the baby. I suffered terrible sickness too.” Shoney did as Anwen suggested, and soon the waves of nausea passed, and she was ready to leave.

“Before we go, Anwen, I must speak.” Shoney took a deep breath. “I love him. I do. This I will not deny, but despite what you may believe deception can twist even that which is most pure. Our life together is based on a pretense. If ever the truth were revealed, the consequences might be unthinkable.”

“No more unthinkable than if you denied Ronan your love or your child the love of his father, but let us not argue.” She took Shoney by the hand. “These things have a way of working themselves out, you’ll see.” Shoney doubted that very much, but honored Anwen’s wishes not to argue.

They left the front door together arm in arm. Despite the tangle of questions threatening to trip her every move, she felt unburdened. She hoped knowing that someone else in Gribun was aware of her true identity would strengthened her sense of self, reinforcing the boundaries between myth and reality—Bridget and Shoney.

She stopped to once more honor her mother at the Dervaig Stones.

“If you permit me, Shoney, I would speak.”

“Of course,” she replied.

“Your mother was no different than any other mother.”

“What do you mean,” Shoney asked.

“More than anything,” Anwen said as they walked side by side, “your mother would want you to live.”

Chapter 25

Ronan was incapable of drawing breath. Dazed, he stared at the grisly chaos below, which suddenly seemed very far away. The sun streamed over him as Shoney's voice echoed in his ears:

The enemy's ascension will come from all sides, their blades gleaming in the sunlight. You fight with valor, but you will be overrun, and they will cut you down.

The enemy was climbing toward him with their swords raised at the ready and bloodlust in their eyes, but Ronan's numb arms hung useless at his side. His gaze skimmed over the wasting bodies of the dead on the ground below. He wondered if they were not better off. Then his eyes met Guthrie's unseeing gaze, his lifeless body steeped in the spoiled earth. A blade had laid open his gut, spilling his entrails in a bloody heap where a seagull feasted, sounding its triumphant caw into the air. Around his fallen friend were countless slain Norsemen. He had struck down many of the enemy before he met his end.

Guthrie's cold stare ignited an eruption of fury that coursed through Ronan's body, reviving his senseless limbs. His hand reached behind his back, unsheathing his blade. He raised his sword high and bent his thighs low, readying his stance for the first mighty swing of his blade. Neither a vision nor God himself controlled his fate. The enemy approached, but he would not wait for their arrival. He raised his head to the sky and bellowed to the heavens. Rushing his attackers, he wielded his blade without mercy. He thrust down, cutting the first who crossed his path from neck to navel. Then he whirled around, slicing the head off the next. Blood splattered his face and the taste of it gathered in his mouth, but it was not his. His destiny was his own, and he was not going to die on those rocks. He growled as the men crumbled at his feet. At the foot of the rocks, the remaining Norse fighters hesitated. He could taste their fear.

"Raise up your swords and fight me," he yelled. He bared his teeth, urging them to meet his blade, but they fled. "Cowards," Ronan called after them.

He started to descend, bloodlust urging him to give chase, but he froze; his gaze was drawn to a distance figure. A burst of sunlight streamed through the clouds and fell on the shoulders of a lone Scotsman, battling Norse warriors atop another tall cluster of rocks.

"No," Ronan screamed.

His father stood perched on the jagged precipice. His sword reflected a gleam of blinding light as he swung at the encroaching enemy. The MacKinnon's back was to him. He fought valiantly, his broad shoulders, so like Ronan's, deftly swinging his blade. His brown

hair shown like amber beneath the sun's rays, and again Shoney's words raced through his mind:

Then the clouds will break, and the sun will stream down upon your back and ignite your hair like amber flames as you stand on a great precipice.

She never saw his face.

Shoney had not prophesied his own death, but rather the death of his father. Without hesitation, he leapt from the rocks, his fall cushioned by the bodies of the slain. Aidan was just ahead. Ronan called to him as he ran toward his father.

"Aidan," he shouted, pointing to Nathair. "The MacKinnon."

Aidan did not falter as he pushed through throngs of warriors, slaying the Norse along the way. Aidan would reach his father first, and Ronan could only hope it would be soon enough. His heart hammered in his chest as he tore across the ruined land. The MacKinnon was still standing. His blade struck with swift speed, cutting down the enemy with every swing, but they did not relent. Norse fighters came at him from all sides. Still, Nathair battled on. Ronan sprinted forward, keeping his father always in his sights. He had to reach him in time. He was almost there. Nathair turned. His drawn lips and wilted shoulders bespoke of crippling exhaustion. Nathair's strength was sapped; the fight was all but over. His looked up and met Ronan's gaze.

"Father," Ronan cried. He was almost there.

His father growled, raising his sword, his eyes never leaving Ronan's. But then his mouth contorted as the tip of a blade pierced through his stomach from behind.

"No," Ronan screamed.

Nathair fell as another sword cut into his flesh. Ronan reached the rocks and released a thunderous roar. A Viking was ascending just ahead of him. With his dirk, Ronan carved into the enemy's calf. Then he dragged the blade down, snapping bone and tearing flesh. The Norse fighter rolled off the rocks screaming to the ground as Ronan bounded to the top where he found Aidan and Dugald defending their fallen laird and fighting with a fury to match his own. He knelt at his father's side. He was still breathing, but with a heavy heart Ronan judged his wounds to be fatal.

He eased his hand beneath Nathair's back, cradling his head onto his lap. "Father," he said. Nathair's lids fluttered at the sound and slowly
lifted.

"My son," he gasped.

"Aye, Father, I am here."

"Ronan," Nathair croaked. "I must tell…," but the MacKinnon's

words drifted off as he lay wheezing and fighting to suck air into his failing body.

"Father, please, do not try to speak. You must rest."

"Nay," Nathair cried, "you must listen. Ronan, I lied to you." He stopped as he struggled once again for breath.

"Father, it does not matter now."

"Listen to me, boy," Nathair whispered. Ronan lowered his head so that his ear was to his father's lips. Each word came slower and softer than the last.

"My body is cold with death, but my heart is warm with thoughts of your mother. Hers is the only face I've seen since this bloody mess started. I was surrounded and forced onto these rocks, and I knew then that I would die. I searched my soul and found but one regret. I lied to you and the lass, but I would make this right before I'm gone."

"Father, please, 'tis done now," Ronan whispered but Nathair fought to continue.

"Tell her that her father died in my arms just as I will die in yours, but he did not curse her. Alec MacKinnon begged me to watch over his woman and his child. He made me promise to bring them to the village and make them part of the clan," Nathair said, trembling.

Panic seemed to grip Nathair as his hand seized hold of Ronan's plaid, straining to lift his head as he stared into Ronan's eyes.

"Listen to me. I thought she was evil. I thought she would bring about our ruin." He collapsed, gasping for breath as his chest heaved from the strain.

"I was wrong. I see now that I was wrong," he whispered. "She was a woman alone and with a child. I should have helped them."

"I will tell her, father."

"Tell her—thank you. Thank you for saving my Anwen."

"I will, father."

Nathair closed his eyes. "Ronan," he whispered.

"Aye, Father."

"I see your mother's face. She is smiling…Anwen…my love." His lips curved into a smile, and then he was gone.

Ronan rested Nathair's head on the ground. He swallowed the tears that rose in his throat. There was no time to grieve. He took up the MacKinnon's sword and laid it on his father's lifeless chest before joining his clansmen in their endless battle against the Vikings. He stood back to back with Aidan and Dugald, forming a defensive circle around Nathair's body. With their backs protected by each other, they were impenetrable, stronger than any armor.

As the battle raged on, Ronan saw the clouds dissipate and the wind die down. The storm that raged and fought on behalf of the Highland warriors had passed. The din of crashing waves and

rumbling thunder was gone, replaced by a new sound. The blare of the Norse horn called the Vikings back to sea.

"They are retreating," Aidan exclaimed.

The remnants of the Norse army raced toward the battered long ships. Those that were still sea worthy were pushed from the beach and into the surf. As the square sails unraveled and the oars dipped into the waves, Ronan remembered the once mighty fleet that had filled the Firth of Clyde just the day before. King Haakon was going to return to his homeland with a shadow of the glory with which he left.

And so were they.

Ronan's heart filled with sorrow as he stood witness to their own depleted numbers. Some of the warriors sounded their battle cries in triumph while others collapsed, overwhelmed with fatigue and heartache for their fallen brothers. Despite the Norse retreat, Ronan knew that neither side could be hailed the victor. From his vantage point on the rocks, he could see the dead choking the coastal waters and covering what seemed like every space of earth. Both sides had suffered agonizing loss.

"Now what do we do, Ronan," Dugald asked, his eyes glazed and red with exhaustion.

"We push on, Dugald," he said. He encircled his mouth with both hands and called out to his clan, "Remember the Death of King Alpin."

Over and over, he shouted as his surviving kin gathered around him. So few assembled, less than half the number that set out from Mull. He continued to holler with the hope that someone had not heard his call. Finally, he reached behind his back and withdrew his sword. Brandishing it high in the air, he sounded the cry one last time to honor the dead. One by one, the men raised their swords and cried out, "Remember the Death of King Alpin."

Ronan stared down at his father as he listened, feeling the sorrow that imbued every call. When there was silence Ronan spoke.

"Our grief must wait, for there is much to be done. Go now. Search for the wounded and bury the dead."

"What about the MacKinnon," Aidan whispered as he stared down at his fallen laird.

"You will stay with him, Aidan, while I decide what should be done. The rest of you spread out and pray for our fallen brothers."

Ronan carried bodies draped in sodden plaid folds to the fresh earth beyond the shadow of the fray to await burial. A priest moved through the lines of the dead, blessing their bodies and praying for their souls. Beyond the dead were the soldiers receiving their last rites whose wounds ran too deep to mend. Ronan stopped to rest, gazing further inland toward Largs where the wounded were being tended to by the

village healers.

Two woeful days had passed since the Norse retreat. Ronan's thoughts turned to his clansmen's families who at that moment did not know that their cherished sons, brothers, and fathers were waiting to be placed deep in the ground forty leagues away from their home. They had managed to save some of the Mull MacKinnons. A few lucky souls would live to see their beloved isle again.

"Look, 'tis the banner of the king," a maid called out.

Ronan looked south toward Kelburn Castle and saw a dozen riders heading their way. Each soldier carried the banner of Alexander III, all but one. As they grew closer, Ronan had his first glimpse of the young king. Wide dark eyes and brown curls made his youthful face seem even younger, but his long straight nose hinted at the man he would grow into.

"Chieftains, to me," the king called. Men split away from their clans as they moved to kneel before the king.

"Ronan that means you," Aidan said. "Go on."

Ronan looked to where is father lay. Nathair had been blessed by the priest and shrouded with a length of clean white linen.

"Nay, Aidan. The king called upon the Mull MacKinnon, and it was my father who answered his call. 'Tis my father who will answer his call now." Ronan directed his men to encircle the MacKinnon. They lifted his body upon their shoulders and carried their laird to the king.

"What man is this?" Alexander asked.

"He is Nathair, Laird of the Mull MacKinnon."

"And you are his son," Alexander said knowingly. "Your name?"

"I am Ronan."

"Ronan, you honor your father here today. I mourn his passing as I mourn the passing of all those who have fallen for the sake of Scottish sovereignty. Ronan MacKinnon, take your father's sword to Iona and let it be buried amid the great Kings of Scotland."

Ronan bowed his head, overwhelmed by the honor Alexander bestowed upon his father and his clan. His eyes burned with tears as he raised his head and met the young king's gaze, "We are truly grateful, your Majesty."

King Alexander stepped forward and placed his hand on Ronan's shoulder. "It is I who am truly grateful, Ronan." Stepping back, he motioned to all of the warriors surrounding him.

"Hear me, chieftains of Scotland. You have fought bravely and have rid our shores of the Norse invaders. Their army is broken. Their ships do not sail back to Norway—they crawl."

The king cast his gaze to the ground and did not speak. Ronan could tell that he too was shaken over the heavy losses, but when Alexander III raised his head, he was once again the composed leader.

“Many of our warriors have died—your sons and brothers, fathers and kinsmen. Go home now to your clans and soothe your women with the knowledge that the fallen have not died in vain, but that Scotland is strong, and the Western Isles are now safe.”

Ronan’s mind drifted to Mull with its rolling moors and towering cliffs. He longed for home and for Shoney. He could not wait to feel her, to smell her. Only she could remove the dark sight of death from his mind. He pictured her then, standing near the port at Gribun, waving to him as their ship neared. But then doubt enclosed his heart in its menacing grip, and her image vanished from his mind.

What if he returned, and she was gone?

Ronan grunted aloud. Given the underhanded way he obtained her promise to stay, he could not think her dishonorable if she had fled. And what if she had stayed? The war against the Norse might be over, but his struggles with Shoney raged on. When he left, nothing had been resolved. He still had yet to convince her to leave behind her past for the sake of their love, and maybe he never would. Perhaps she would leave him once and for all to take up the legacy of her lineage and become forever the Witch of Dervaig.

Chapter 26

“Your eyes are heavy with sadness,” Anwen said to Shoney, “Come with me, child, into my rooms. No one will disturb us there.”

Shoney followed Anwen from the great hall within the keep, up the stone staircase to her rooms. Upon entering the bedchamber, Shoney strolled aimlessly around for a moment. She stood before the bed, remembering the first night she’d come to the village when Anwen had almost succumbed to illness. Her hand touched the turned posts. They were carved in the shape of large thistles, which made her long for Ronan.

“Sit by the fire, lass, and tell me what troubles you,” Anwen implored.

Shoney expelled a weary sigh as she sat down. “I believe that Morna and Una are suspicious about my condition. It will not be long before everyone will know that I am with child.”

“’Tis true. Even if you don’t tell, your stomach will,” Anwen chuckled. “You will grow fat, and you will think there is simply no way you could grow any larger, and then somehow fatter still you will be.”

“I know this, Anwen, but what will everyone think when the truth is discovered?” Shoney asked.

“I do not know why you wish to keep your condition a secret. I told you already. The clan will rejoice.” Anwen stroked Shoney’s cheek and smiled. “Bridget, understand that you carry the future laird of the MacKinnon.”

“If I may remind you of a few things, Anwen,” Shoney snapped. “My name is Shoney. This child may be a girl, and whether she will be a MacKinnon remains to be seen.” Shoney was in no mood to be handled, and she knew that was what Anwen was trying to do—keep her happy and in Gribun until Ronan’s return.

“I’m sorry, Shoney, but you will soon know what it is to have a mother’s heart, and then you will understand why I shall always carry hope for you and Ronan. Although, I don’t mind telling you, I’m certain you two will be together in the end. Love has a life of its own—a power,” she whispered. “It is gentle and ferocious all at the same time. I know what it is to love and to be loved. Very little in life would I argue is certain, but one thing I am sure of is that Love, once it claims you, is impossible to deny.”

“You have a love match with Nathair then?” Shoney asked, curious to know more about Ronan’s parents.

“Aye, to be sure.”

A sudden glow radiated from Anwen at the mention of Nathair’s

name, erasing the lines from her face and transforming her into a besotted maid.

"I tried to resist Nathair. Unlike most of the other girls, I had no desire to bind myself to the future laird. I knew that I would have to share him with everyone else, and that his duty to the clan would always come first."

"However did he win you?" Shoney asked.

"Persistence," she laughed. "He told me that I was the sun in his sky, and in time he became the sun in mine, but still I refused him when he asked me to be wed."

Anwen stood up and stared out the casement. When she spoke, her voice was distant and dreamy. "Aye, I was stubborn and set against Nathair despite how much I wanted him…needed him. Then one day, the MacLeans attacked," she looked at Shoney. "It was dreadful."

"They were a greater threat in those days," she continued. "Their laird was a ruthless man. I remember father preparing for battle as my mother begged him to stay. I realized then that every man was duty bound to protect the clan. After a short while, my mother started helping da make ready, and I will never forget what she said. She turned to me and said that a clan was a gift worth fighting for, and that everyone must put the good of the clan first. After her words sunk into this thick skull, I ran out of our hut as fast as I could in search of Nathair. And when I found him, I pledged to love him, then and there, until I drew my last breath. And then he kissed me," Anwen blushed and again her voice became wistful. "And I will never forget that kiss."

"You speak of romance and love like it is so easy when it is anything but. My love story is filled with betrayal and deceit. How can I trust what is so dishonest. I spend my days lying to these good people. I have come to love many of them, and they look at me with such confidence, but little do they know that I am the same cloaked figure they have glimpsed limping in the distance, the same woman from which they have cast away their eyes in fear, the very witch that haunts their children's dreams."

"All that proves, Shoney, is their fear is unwarranted and always has been. Their hearts blinded by a prejudice, nurtured only by custom. And you know there are those women among us who secretly revered your mother, your grandmother, and so on…and you my dear. It has been in the spirit of deceit that they have sought your tender healing. They have secreted away in the night, lying to their husbands and their fellow sisters in order to feel the healing touch of the Witch of Dervaig."

Shoney was again amazed by Anwen's awareness. It seemed that she had no secrets when it came to Ronan's mother.

“How did you know about our midnight visitors?” Shoney asked.

“I hold the confidence of the women in the village. They have all come to me in private to reveal their true hearts and minds, and I have never betrayed a trust before, not even to Nathair.”

Anwen reached out and gently took her hand. “But what else bothers you, Shoney, I feel you are not telling me something.”

Shoney stared into Anwen’s unwavering eyes. Sometimes, Shoney was convinced that Anwen had the gift of sight as well, because she always seemed to know Shoney’s heart. Or, perhaps she had a different gift.

“Anwen,” Shoney whispered, “can you hear other people’s thoughts?”

Anwen laughed out loud. She seemed delighted by Shoney’s question. “Nay, lass, I am just getting on in years. What is in another’s eyes is clearer as you age—a small consolation given everything you lose as you get older,” she chuckled again. “No, Shoney, I do not share your gift.”

Shoney’s mouth dropped open. “How did you know about my gift?”

“I didn’t until now, but your mother told me of her visions when we were girls. I’ve been wondering for some time now whether you shared this gift.”

Anwen leaned closer, her eyes seemed like daggers, cutting through the barriers of Shoney’s mind, seeking the truth only Shoney could reveal.

“Is this what weighs on you, lass? Have you had a vision of what may come to pass?”

The image of Ronan’s proud strong back ripped open by the enemy’s sword tore through her mind, but she chased the vision away. She could not bear to tell Anwen of her son’s demise—possible demise. Shoney still clung to the slightest shred of hope, that Ronan would indeed make his own fate. Besides, that morning she had collapsed by the overwhelming force of a new vision, a new terror. The vision had left her breathless and stricken with grief.

Shoney closed her eyes, “There was a lone slender billed Curlew flying high over Gribun. Its plaintive song reverberated through my ears, twisting my heart with sorrow. The faces of your kinfolk were contorted with anguish. Many collapsed, sobbing with grief. Then the bird too began to cry. Its tears fell like sheets of rain that soon overwhelmed the village and flooded the crops.” Shoney’s eyes flew open as she suddenly became aware of her own freshly shed tears. She felt as though she were drowning in misery.

“Go on, Shoney, what follows?” Anwen implored, her eyes were wide with apprehension.

“’Tis all, I’m afraid,” Shoney replied.

“But what does it mean?” Anwen urged.

“The significance of a vision is sometimes very plain. Often, however, they are symbolic and require interpretation. In this case, all that can be divined for certain is that misfortune flies this way.”

“But what form does this calamity take?”

“I know not, nor do I know how best to prepare,” Shoney said.

Anwen, who had slumped in her chair, suddenly sat straight and hardness gleamed in her eye. “We shall prepare in every way.” She rose and strode to the door
and threw it open as she called out, “Flora, bring to me, Bhaltair.”

“What do you intend, Anwen?”

“We shall take no chances. We are going to double the watch on the stores and the grounds. Also, I want you to examine every villager in order to prevent an outbreak of disease.”

Anwen passed through the door, leaving Shoney still sitting with her mouth agape. Anwen could be a formidable woman when required, she decided.

“Come, now, Shoney. There is much to be done.” Shoney jumped to her feet and did as she was bid.

They entered the great hall. Straight away, Anwen began giving orders. She sent Bhaltair off with instruction to double the guard against the MacLeans. She put Morna in charge of ensuring the harvest was completed ahead of schedule. Then she ordered Shoney to return to her hut and await the first villagers to be examined.

Shoney marveled at the bustle of activity that awaited her in the village. Everyone was doing Anwen’s bidding as though it were the command of the laird.

By the next afternoon, she had examined almost all of the inhabitants of Gribun. At least a dozen people still waited outside her door, but one stubborn little boy was holding up the line by refusing to stick out his tongue. She was about to ask Una, who was acting as her assistant, to tickle the lad until he surrendered when the bell sounded.

Una inhaled sharply. “’Tis the alarm,” she whispered.

“Do not panic,” Shoney instructed as they bustled outside. “Come along, everyone. Perhaps, Anwen summons us.”

Shoney led the villagers through Gribun’s winding paths, passing huts and workshops, and meeting others along the way. They arrived at the baily where they found Argyle standing alone.

“What is happening,” Shoney asked the elder.

“The watch spotted a small vessel sailing this way.” Argyle’s words swept through the villagers like a happy breeze. The baily hummed with hopeful chatter of the men’s return. “Anwen and the others have already headed down to port to meet him,” Argyle added.

“Him? You mean to say, this vessel carries but one man,” Shoney exclaimed as a hush settled over the crowd.

“Only one of our warriors returns,” Una cried, her eyes wide with fear.

“It must be a messenger,” Shoney called for all to hear. “Perhaps, he brings word from your laird. Let us join the others and go meet him.”

“Bridget.”

Shoney turned to see who addressed her and found Bhaltair looking down at her from atop his horse.

“Give me your hand, and I will take you ahead,” he said, reaching down and lifting her into the seat in front of him.

“Ride like death is behind us,” she whispered. “I must know what has happened.”

They rode through the village and down to the port just as the lone sailor was exiting his vessel.

“’Tis Aidan,” Shoney exclaimed.

He looked no worse for wear, she was pleased to note. She smiled as she saw Morna rush forward to greet him. It was a loving reunion, and Shoney glimpsed the joy that had set Morna’s face aglow. Next, Anwen welcomed Aidan home. She pulled him into a motherly embrace. Then they stood facing each other, Anwen standing with her back to Shoney. Shoney leaned forward trying to hear Aidan’s message but to no avail.

Shoney prayed to the Mother of all for joyful tidings, but when Anwen released a shrill sob and collapsed at Aidan’s feet, Shoney’s blood ran cold.

“Nay,” Anwen cried. Over and over again, she wept her denial, and each sob was a knife to Shoney’s heart, obliterating the hope that had kept her going over the past weeks.

Shoney slipped from the horse and stumbled to the ground. Her ears were ringing, and she couldn’t breathe. Bhaltair was soon at her side, asking if she was alright, but his distant voice sounded like a dream, and Shoney wondered whether it was all just a horrible nightmare.

Villagers pushed past her as they tried to reach Aidan and learn of their loved one’s fate. In a daze, she stood on the outskirts. Through a haze of confusion and sorrow, she watched her new found sisters grieve for their fallen husbands and sons as terrified children clung to their skirts. All feeling left her. Ronan was gone. Her vision had come to fruition.

“And so it is done,” she said aloud. “All is lost.”

Misfortune found its way to Mull, despite earlier preparations. No action or planning could have prevented the sorrow that now swept

through the clan. Their tears ran freely as they waded through a deluge of grief. Shoney could not bear to listen to their sobs any longer. She turned away and headed back toward the village. Misery engulfed her, coursing through her veins. She felt as though she were on fire. She wished to tear at her flesh and pull it away from her heart, which quivered and pulsated in anguish.

The village, which was usually a bustle of activity, was eerily silent. Even the animals seemed to sense the recent devastation as they hid away in their pens. Dragging her feet on legs that longed to give way, Shoney pushed her door open and went inside her hut. Her eyes were drawn straight away to the little basket near her chair. It overflowed with baby clothes Anwen had given her. Some of which she had made but many of the pieces had been Ronan's when he was a babe.

They would be his legacy to his child. She gathered each piece and stuffed them all in a satchel. She could not stay in Gribun without him. Despite her newfound friends, her heart would not allow her to remain. Pain was mounting inside of her, pushing against the walls she had temporarily erected. But they would soon give way, and she wanted to be home when they finally tumbled down and her sorrow was released.

A knock sounded at the door. Shoney's head snapped around. "Shoney are you in there? 'Tis Aidan."

"Go away, Aidan. I do not wish to see you," she said. "I do not wish to see anyone ever again," she whispered.

The door pushed open, and Aidan stepped inside. His eyes moved to the satchel in her hand.

"You are packing?" he asked.

"Aye," she said as she went back to the task.

"You mean to leave, Shoney?"

She did not reply.

"I rode ahead of the others to find you. The women are worried about you, and they seek your comfort during this difficult time. How can you abandon them?" He grabbed her arms, forcing her to look at him.

"Shoney, this is your home now."

"No, Aidan," she spat, "this is not my home. You used deception to bring me here. Remember. This has never been my home. This is Bridget's hut not Shoney's."

"Regardless of how you came to be here, you are here now, and the people need you," he said.

She turned away from him and stared numbly at the glowing ashes left over from her morning fire. Her sorrow was so great that she was afraid its release would destroy her. She took a deep breath to bolster the internal wall keeping her emotions at bay. There was no room

inside her heart for the guilt Aidan was trying to use against her. But, unwittingly, her mind returned to Anwen's crumbling body as Aidan broke the news of Ronan's death, and Shoney tasted bitter remorse. Her newfound sisters were suffering just as she was.

"My heart is with Anwen," she murmured as she continued to focus on the glowing embers. "Having already lost her first son to battle, this is too great a heartache for one soul to bear."

"Aye, the whole clan mourns his passing," Aidan said. "He was a devoted leader. Even Argyle said he could not recall or heard mention of a better chieftain."

"What," she cried, looking at Aidan.

"Nathair," he said, "his death is a tragedy."

Her eyes opened wide. She could not speak or breathe. She stumbled over to him and grabbed hold of his arms as she tried to utter the words her heart was shouting.

"Ronan, Ronan," she croaked.

"Ronan?" Aidan repeated.

"Dead. Ronan is dead."

"Ronan is alive, Shoney," he said.

Her knees gave way, and she collapsed to the ground. The walls holding back her emotions crumbled. The numbness left her body as sensation surged through her. She shook with sobs. The love, the relief was too great to contain.

"Shoney, why do you cry?" Aidan tried to lift her chin in order to force her eyes to meet his, but she refused.

"Go away, Aidan," she sobbed.

"Shoney, I thought you would be happy to know Ronan lived," he said.

"Go away," she screamed.

He scurried out the door as her head dropped again to the ground.

She wailed, rolling onto her back and covering her face with her hands. She cried for the unbearable pain she felt every day since he first left, thinking she would never see him again. She cried for the countless number of times she touched her stomach knowing he would never hold his child. She cried for the agony that seized her soul when she thought for sure she had lost him.

But he was alive. He was alive.

The reality that Ronan lived was beginning to set in. She choked back her tears.

He was alive.

Suddenly, her sobs were replaced with laughter.

He was alive.

She stood up and twirled around the room. Soon he would be home and then…She stopped dancing… and then what?

Mother of all, at last she must decide. Was she to be Shoney or Bridget?

The image of her mother blazed in her mind's eye, and Shoney saw her standing once again amid the Dervaig Stones, but it was not a vision that filled her mind, simply a memory. She was a little girl, and her mother had painted lovely blue images on their cheeks of animals and symbols of the gods. Then Brethia began to dance, weaving around the standing stones and leaping over the ones that slumbered. Shoney could hear the lilting sound her own childish laughter. Her mother raced toward her and took hold of her hands, and together they spun around and around. The sky above her blurred into a blue and white swirl, and all the while her beautiful mother smiled, radiating love. She lifted Shoney into her arms. Shoney remembered the smell of her mother's hair and the secure pressure of her embrace, and she remembered her mother's words:

"You bring my life joy, Shoney."

The words echoed in her mind, and all that had been muddled was at that moment as clear as the spring rain. Shoney knew what she would do. She would honor her mother.

Chapter 27

Ronan stood at the bow of his ship, staring at the cliffs of Mull. They were almost home. Figures lined the pier, waiting to welcome them. He strained to glimpse Shoney's sleek figure and flaxen hair, but he saw no trace of her. Every night since they first set out from Largs, he dreamt of her standing on the dock, smiling and waving as they sailed into port. He imagined climbing onto the wharf as she rushed to him and threw her arms around his neck, declaring once and for all her undying love.

"Fool," he swore aloud.

"Ronan," Dugald said behind him.

"Aye, what is it," Ronan snapped.

"Nothing," Dugald said as he began to back away. "'Tis just…I just wanted to say we were home."

Dugald's eyes mirrored his own tormented soul. The dark images of war often came to the forefront of his mind, and his thoughts seldom strayed from his brothers who now lay for all eternity beneath a land upon which their families would never tread.

Three days past since they landed on Iona and buried his father's sword beside the grave of their MacKinnon ancestor, King Kenneth MacAlpin. He sent Aidan ahead to tell of their coming. By now everyone would know of the many men lost to the enemy. He returned home to a people plagued by grief. But he would rally their spirits and lead them into a new era where they were no longer a territory in dispute but as much a part of Scotland as Edinburgh or Glasgow.

Dugald's anguished eyes turned to Mull and lit with joy. The other warriors seemed to share the same internal battle. Ronan did not want his men to suppress their gladness. They were alive and grateful to be so. He smiled and put his hand on Dugald's shoulder.

"Aye, Dugald, we are home, my friend."

Turning to the rest of his men, he cheered, "We are home." Celebration ensued and all at once, the atmosphere grew lighter on board. Life would move forward, and the clan would heal.

His eyes scanned the ever growing crowd that lined the pier, yet he still did not see Shoney. He now regretted his resolve to respect her wishes. He decided on the journey home that if she had left Gribun—if she had left him—then he would let her go, but now that this was appearing more and more likely, he doubted he could be so noble.

Anguish lingered in the eyes of every MacKinnon and fresh tears seeped down their cheeks, but the onlookers cheered as their heroes returned from war. No sooner had Ronan climbed onto the pier then

he was knocked back into the sea by the eager embraces of his clan. Numerous hands reached down to pull their new, sopping wet laird out of the water. When he wiped his eyes, his mother's face appeared before him, and he pulled her into a tight embrace. The sudden grief had altered her appearance. Her hair, barely touched by silver before he left, was streaked with a thick band of white, and her eyes were lined with pain, but they sparkled as they searched his face, and the arms that embraced him were strong.

"My son, you are home," she whispered. "Thank you, Blessed Mother, for protecting my son."

Ronan smiled and kissed her cheek. "Aye, mother, I am home."

"Ronan," someone said softly behind him. He turned and there was Una, the pride of Guthrie's life. Her dark curls framed her ashen face as tears streamed from her
black eyes. She clutched her new baby close to her heart.

"Och, Una," he pressed his lips together as he fought to rid his mind of Guthrie's blank stare and the gruesome sight of his belly torn asunder.

"Aidan told me…," Una's voice broke, and she turned away. Then she forced her shoulders back and faced Ronan again. "Aidan told me that you saw Guthrie."

"Aye, Una. I did." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "He did not suffer," he lied, "and no one fought as bravely." His voice broke as he fought back his own tears. "He was blessed by the king's priest and laid to rest beside his brothers."

Una, as strong as the land beneath their feet, nodded her head in acceptance. She placed a kiss upon her son's brow and said, "You will tell little Guthrie about his father, about how valiantly he fought."

"Aye, Una, I promise you I will."

Ronan peered at the tiny babe. "He looks like his da," he smiled. "He'll be sure to have his da's strength and goodness, I'd wager."

Una beamed at Ronan's words. Then she cleared her throat and in a brighter voice asked, "What are you dawdling down here for? I'd have thought you'd be racing to meet Bridget by now."

Astonished, Ronan did not reply at first, and when he did, he stuttered like an untested whelp. "You mean Bridget is here, here in Gribun?"

"Bless me, Ronan," Una smiled, "where else would she be?"

Ronan turned on his heel without another word to anyone and strode over to the nearest horse, which he mounted and kicked hard in the flank. His mind raced faster than the horse galloped as he headed toward the village. He was plagued by questions, but none could hold his focus. When he tried to think about why she stayed—was it just because of the promise or had she decided to make Gribun

her home—her image filled his mind, leaving room for nothing else.

He could not believe that after traveling so many leagues, after so much darkness and bloodshed, he was finally going to see Shoney. He would stand before her and touch her and listen to the gentle rhythm of her voice and smell her waves of golden hair.

"What in God's name," Ronan exclaimed as his horse was yanked to a halt by someone else's hand.

"Are you a blasted lunatic, Aidan?" Ronan shouted. "What are you doing?"

Aidan stared at Ronan's reins still gripped in his hand as though he too could not believe what he had just done.

"There had best be a fire somewhere or a ship sinking. Explain yourself, Aidan."

"Och, Ronan. I've been racing after you, shouting your name, practically begging you to stop. But you either refused, or you somehow didn't hear me."

Ronan's anger eased a little when he discovered his friend had tried to get his attention by more traditional means.

"Sorry, my mind was indeed occupied, and I didn't hear you."

"It was her; was it not? You were thinking about Shoney. 'Tis where you are racing off to."

"Aye, and if it is all the same to you, 'tis where I would like to race off to again. Whatever you need will have to wait."

Thinking the matter settled, Ronan nudged his horse forward, but once again, Aidan caught his reins. Ronan grabbed hold of Aidan's wrist, and in a menacing tone, he said, "Friend, I did not like that the first time, and unless I am mistaken, 'tis my arse which rides this horse and your arse which is asking for a good wallop. Keep your hands to yourself, or I will see that you cannot sit a horse for a week."

"Would you just listen to me, you pig headed oaf," Aidan snapped. "'Tis about Shoney."

Ronan grabbed hold of Aidan's shirt and, almost lifting him clear out of his saddle, pulled him close so that Aidan's face was nigh a breath from his own.

"What about Shoney," he growled.

"What I am going to say I truly believe or else I would not risk the beating I am sure to receive."

"Quit babbling, Aidan, and make your point," Ronan snapped.

"I think you have misjudged Shoney, or at least how she feels about you."

"What?" Ronan could not have been more surprised. The sincerity of Shoney's affection was not the question Ronan was expecting Aidan to pose.

"You had best have a good reason for what you just said."

“If you let go of me, I’ll tell you,” Aidan said.

“No. I intend to hold on securely to ensure you do not slip away. That way I do not have to chase you down if I decide that in the end you do deserve a good beating. And let me just say, Aidan, odds are moving in that direction.”

“Alright, I’ll get right to it. The day I arrived and told your mother about your Da’s passing, Shoney believed it was you who died, and to be painfully honest, she didn’t seem too broken hearted. But when I told her that you lived, the lass broke into tears and raged at me to get out of her hut as though I delivered ill news.”

“You are lying,” Ronan growled through gritted teeth.

“I have never lied to you, Ronan.”

Ronan’s grip on Aidan’s plaid slackened as he stared out in a daze over the moors. Could it be true? Could the very woman he had yearned for, stayed alive for truly wished he died? He felt as though someone had just struck him hard in the stomach, knocking the breath from his body.

“When you saw her again did she offer any explanation?” Ronan asked.

“I have not seen her. She has stayed in her hut these three days. Only your mother, Una, and Morna have spoken to her. And to be honest, I don’t think I could have faced her if she had come out.”

Ronan was not prepared for this. He knew she might not wish to relinquish her past and remain in the village as Bridget, but he never distrusted her love. A part of him wanted to race back to the ships and run away from the doubt now plaguing his heart, but he was not going to flee. He would not back down. After coming so far and fighting through the very depths of hell to return to her, by God, he would hear her denial of their love from her own lips.

“Get out of my way, Aidan,” he snarled. Aidan did not have to be asked twice, for which Ronan was thankful. Rage threatened to explode inside him, and Aidan would not have escaped injury if he tried to intervene again.

Once more, Ronan dug his heels into his horse’s flanks, pushing the beast onward as if the Devil himself was behind him in flaming pursuit. He sped through the village pathways heedless of the chickens and sheep that skirted the horse’s pounding hooves. When he came upon Shoney’s hut, he pulled his mount to an abrupt halt and leapt to the ground. He stomped up to the door and raised his fist, swinging it down with pounding force but stopped just before his knuckles connected with the wood.

What was wrong with him?

He turned away from the door, running his hand through his hair in frustration. What was he going to do, break down the door and

demand she love him? Thrash her until she yielded? Either she loved him or she didn't. Either she was willing to surrender the things of her past and make a new life with him or she wasn't…There was only one way to find out.

He turned back to the doorway and took a deep breath. Then he rapped lightly on the wood.

She did not call for him to enter.

He knocked a little louder and still received no response. He slowly pushed the door open and stepped inside. She sat at the fire with her back to him.

He cleared his throat.

"Shoney, I knocked, but you did not answer," he said.

She did not turn around.

"I have returned, Shoney, just as I said I would."

Still, she would not face him.

He ached to rush to her and lift her into his arms. He did not understand how she could be so cold, so unfeeling. Aidan must have been right.

He straightened his stance. If he could face the fiercest Viking warriors, then he could face a mere slip of a lass. But despite the valor of his thoughts, his hands shook with nerves. His fate, his future happiness was about to be decided.

"Shoney, I need to know once and for all," he stated, "will you build a home with me and a family? Will you be my wife?"

She did not answer.

"Shoney, why do you not look at me?" Ronan implored, his resolve weakening.

"Shoney, answer me," he pled.

"Shoney…Shoney."

Then she stood.

He held his breath as he watched her pivot. First, he glimpsed her profile—her pert nose and downcast eyes. Then, finally, she faced him.

Slowly, she raised her gaze to meet his. Her eyes were brimming with tears, and her mouth was fixed in a grim line.

"How dare you call me Shoney," she snapped. She stomped toward him and stuck her all too familiar finger in his face.

"My name," she said, "is Bridget." Then her lips curved into a smile.

As the meaning of her words rang clear, he collapsed to his knees and expelled the breath he had been holding.

"You little minx. I have been to hell and back. I have witnessed unspeakable atrocities and the depth of man's ruthlessness. But nothing I have seen could have prepared me for the brutality you

inflicted upon my innocent heart just now," he said with feigned soberness.

"Given how you so cruelly earned my promise before you left, I felt a little suspense would not go amiss," she smiled as she rushed into his arms.

"I supposed I deserved that, although was my torture truly so cruel? I can still hear your cries of pleasure."

He lowered his lips to kiss her, but he hesitated.

"So you will stay with me then?" he asked. He had to be certain. He needed to hear the words.

"Are you daft?" she laughed. "Aye, Ronan, Laird of the MacKinnon, I vow to love you and to live out the rest of my days here with you."

He threw his head back and hollered as he placed his hands at her waist and lifted her high in the air. Pieces of dried peat broke off as her head grazed the ceiling. He spun her around and around in circles. He could not stop laughing, and she seemed equally unable to contain her mirth. The sound of their laughter filled the confines of the small hut. He imagined the walls threatened to collapse under the collective pressure of their contentment.

Then once again he pulled her close, "You will never regret loving me," he whispered. He stared into her stormy gray eyes.

"But, wait. Shoney…"

"You mean Bridget, don't you," she smiled.

"Never when we are alone," he grinned. "But, I must know. Why did Aidan say you grieved when he told you I was alive? Is the regret and sacrifice of loving me too great to bear?"

She pressed a kiss to his lips. "I have no regrets, and I make no sacrifice. For what I realized, Ronan, is that I honor my mother by loving you."

"I do not understand," he said.

"It was not my mother's convictions or her beliefs that truly gave her life meaning. It was I," she smiled. "I gave my mother joy, and I know now that what she would want most is for me to find joy in my own life. You see Ronan, I understand this now because…," her voice trailed off as she blushed and averted her eyes.

He cupped her cheeks forcing her gaze to meet his own.

"Because, why?" he said.

"Because I know how it feels to love as a mother does."

Her tears fell as she took his hand and pressed it to her stomach, and his eyes grew wide as he felt a slight roundness that had not been there before.

He dropped to his knees and bending his head, he placed a kiss on her belly. "How exquisite you are to me," he whispered. "From out of great loss springs forth new life. We shall have many children." She

raised an eyebrow at him.

He chuckled, “Yes, my dear, my hunger for you is such that you shall never go long without one of my sons or daughters growing inside you.”

She playfully swatted him before wrapping her arms around his neck. He stood, lifting her again in the air.

“You are everything to me,” he whispered.

“And I am nothing without you,” she replied.

Then he lowered his mouth to hers, slowly taking full possession of her lips. He held her tightly, vowing to spend the rest of his days ensuring hers were always filled with joy.

Epilogue

Shoney's eyelids snapped open. Something, or someone, had spoiled her slumber. She reached out and felt for Ronan who was fast asleep beside her. He slept peacefully despite the tempest that raged outside. In the darkness, she could not see his face, but she did not need light to conjure forth the image of her beloved. The small lines now creasing his eyes and mouth were softer when he slept. Shoney stroked his graying hair and placed a kiss on his lips. Satisfied that Ronan slept undisturbed, she lay back in the darkness and waited for the violators of her rest to reveal themselves.

A deafening clap of thunder rebounded off the stones of Dun Ara Castle. Soundlessly, she tugged at their blanket, pulling the woolen fibers over Ronan's shoulder and beneath her chin to banish the chill from their bed. This simple movement was her only acknowledgement of the weather. Shoney knew it was not the storm that pulled her from her dreams. Having lived forty-nine winters, she was used to the frequent tempests that raged unchecked over the moors, and with the same unyielding strength of the land, she paid them no heed. She closed her eyes and waited, knowing that all would be revealed soon enough.

A smile gradually lifted the corners of her lips. Something from deep within her body sought to be acknowledged. There, she felt it again, only this time she knew what it was.

The gentle thumping of another's heart was beating in time to her own.

United, their hearts beat gently and evenly. Shoney felt as if her whole body was wrapped in snug layers of heat like a cocoon. She closed her eyes, losing herself to the strange but wonderful sensation. She was being lulled to sleep when a white light flashed before her eyes, warning Shoney that a vision was forthcoming.

She saw a cloaked figure, holding fast to a small bundle, shielding it from the storm, which pounded the moors with stinging rain and blazed the night sky with white lightning. Still the figure pushed onward toward what flashes of light revealed as the Daione Shi Knoll in the distance. The rain ceased and blackness fell but only for a moment. The clouds parted and a full moon revealed the figure standing amid the infamous moss covered stones at the foot of the knoll. But the bundle was gone, replaced by a fistful of pink flowers.

The serenity Shoney felt was ripped away, only to be replaced by panic as her heart's pulse rapidly accelerated. The aggressive rhythm produced a tremor that pulsed through her body and pulled her from her vision. At once, Shoney cast aside her cover, and in one fluid

movement, she rose from the bed, leaving its warmth and Ronan behind. She yanked the brown folds of her tunic over her long golden and silver hair and settled it over her linen shift. Not bothering to belt her waist, she put on her leather slippers and grabbed her thickest cloak.

Then she turned her attention to the table where she kept her salves and potions. With hurried but precise motions, she shuffled through a series of small glass bottles and leather pouches, but she did not know what she needed. At last, intuition guided her to a small blue vial. Its contents of Water Mint and May Blossom was used to revive the body. Tucking it deep within her pockets, she glanced back at Ronan before hurrying downstairs to the hall. She moved silently passed the dogs asleep by the fire and pushed open the door. Then with neither hesitation nor fear, she gave Skatha, the goddess of shadows, a warm smile and stepped out into the night and into the storm.

She could hear the whipping winds catapulting waves over the isle's steep, rocky coastline, but she was not heading toward the ocean. Instead, she trudged inland through the storm to the open moors. The heavy rains created small rivers of mud and washed out bracken. Overhead a bolt of lightning spread its luminous fingers across the sky, revealing the bleak wintry hills that stretched out endlessly before her, but only for an instant and then the light was gone, replaced once more with murky darkness. Shoney was soaked through to the skin, her body stooped from the weight of her water logged cloak and tunic, but she was not deterred. Something powerful had beckoned her—needed her, and she would answer its call.

There were only two things she knew for certain. First, she had to make haste to the Daione Shi Knoll, and second, whatever it was that waited for her there would unequivocally change her life.

The Knoll kept flashing over and over again in her mind's eye. She knew this spot well. It was believed to be the entrance to the faery kingdom. Shoney smiled for a moment when she remembered advising Flora on how to treat her son when he fell on the pink flowers while at play. But that was many years ago. Shoney sighed as she pressed on.

At last, Shoney arrived just as lightening slashed across the sky. Winter had drained the Knolls beauty. Everywhere, the rocks were exposed having shed their summertime coat of thick moss, and though their jagged edges appeared sharp and severe, in truth, Shoney sensed a frailty about the place. She felt sadness everywhere, as if the stones themselves yearned for their glory days of emerald green abundance and the splendor of pink flowers.

She moved along the stones certain they held a treasure that was meant for her. Hidden among the tallest of the rocks, Shoney spotted

the tiny bundle the cloaked figure in her vision had been carrying. She bent low and folded back a piece of sodden wool, exposing the face of a sweet babe, shadowed by darkness. It was tiny and icy cold to the touch. Even with the wind howling, Shoney could hear the baby's raspy breaths.

Gazing down upon the helpless innocent, Shoney realized it was the baby's heartbeat that invaded her sleep and set the night's events in motion. Its spirit had beckoned her. Without further delay, she withdrew the small vial from her pocket and removed the wax casing. Then, with a sure hand, she poured the contents down the infant's throat. The child sputtered and hiccupped, but the effects were immediate. With joyful relief, Shoney listened as the baby's breathing grew deeper.

Wasting no time at all, she scooped the infant into her arms, wrapping the folds of her cloak tightly around them both. But before she began their journey home, Shoney crooned, "Everything is just as it should be." Then she dipped her head, placing a kiss on the baby's brow. When her lips touched upon the infant's forehead a white light flashed in Shoney's mind, followed by another vision.

The badge of the Mackinnon, a fir branch, was suspended high against the starry sky. There was a stillness in the air and an eerie silence, which was broken suddenly as the branch burst into bright flames. And in the distance, Shoney heard a single warrior sound the battle cry of the MacKinnon, Remember the death of King Alpin.

Shoney snapped back to full awareness. She did not understand the significance of her vision but divining the truth would have to wait until both she and the babe were warm and dry. As if to hasten her onward, the storm intensified. Lightening slashed once more through the clouds and thunder shook the ground, creating a din like that of an army on the move. The baby whimpered in response, but Shoney pressed it close and said, "Hush now, be not afraid little one. 'Tis only Taranis, the thunder god. He is making himself heard this night."

As silent as she could, Shoney entered the great hall and sat with the child by the fire. Not surprising, there were no traces of plaid or markers to hint at the origins of the baby, just small strips of wool. The child was likely left to the faeries because of some deformity or imperfection, but a quick examination showed she was a perfect baby girl and only days old. Shoney wrapped the babe in a clean plaid. Then she cradled her close and fed her some goat's milk.

"You will be called Nellore," Shoney told her as she drank hungrily, "feral one."

At dawn, Shoney awoke still seated in the chair with Nellore cradled in her arms.

"You have been busy, my dear."

Shoney looked up to see Ronan staring down at her with a bemused, and slightly bewildered, look on his face. Shoney spoke of how she had come to find Nellore and gave Ronan an account of her vision.

He paced the length of the hall, clearly needing time to absorb all she had said. His pace quickened and his plaid swirled about his knees as he appeared increasingly more agitated. After a while, he looked at Shoney, his face strained with frustration.

"But what is the significance? What does this mean?" he asked.

Shoney laid the sleeping infant on a pallet and walked over to where Ronan stood, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"I know not the fullness of meaning, Ronan. The only thing I am certain of is that the destiny of our clan and the destiny of this small child are somehow crossed."

"But for good or for ill?"

"I do not know," she answered.

He brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek and tilted her head as he placed a lingering kiss on her lips. For a moment, Shoney forgot Nellore and the future of the clan. All she saw and felt was the man before her. Age had only increased his appeal. His features were more rugged and handsome than ever, and the streaks of silver at his temples contrasted against the amber of his eyes, making them even brighter.

"What would you have me do?" His words brought Shoney back to reality.

"Find a good family to raise her, one that will love and cherish her."

Ronan walked to where the baby slept and knelt down beside her. He gently pressed a kiss to Nellore's brow. "I have a family in mind—Ewan MacKinnon."

Shoney considered Ewan and his lovely wife, Brenna. It was well known that Brenna longed for a child but was unable to conceive. They would make fine parents for Nellore, but would the clan be suspicious of a child taken from the Daione Shi Knoll?

"Will the clan accept Nellore?

"Do not fret, my love. I have already considered the problem of her origins. You know as well as I that the village women gossip about Brenna."

"Aye, I have even heard it said that Brenna is barren because the faery queen is jealous of her beauty and so makes changelings of her unborn."

"We shall bring Nellore to Ewan's home under the cover of night. We do not need to tell them your story, only that she now belongs to them. We will of course provide them with an appropriate tale to

share with the clan."

Ronan lifted Nellore into his arms. "Let it be told that Ewan and Brenna find Nellore by their fire when they woke, swaddled and lying in a basket. Some will say the faery queen must have witnessed the goodness of Brenna's heart and decided Brenna was a woman deserving of motherhood. Others will claim it was the merciful Son of God who gave the child to the couple owing to their great virtue. Either way, I believe all will rejoice. We shall make a celebration in her honor and send for the abbot."

"Why?" Shoney asked.

"We shall summon him to baptize Nellore, which will remove any lingering doubts about the holiness of her origins."

Shoney laughed playfully, "Do you mean the clansfolk might disapprove if we told them the child was discovered at the doorway to the faery kingdom by the infamous Witch of Dervaig?"

"Yes, my pagan queen, this might produce a few objections," he chuckled. "Now, Bridget, be a good Scottish wife to your laird and change this child. She has wet through my plaid."

She laid Nellore on a blanket to change her, but Ronan grabbed her from behind and pulled her into his arms for a kiss. When his lips left hers he whispered, "But make sure 'tis Shoney who comes to my bed tonight."

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Historical Romance author Lily Baldwin loves writing, Scotland, her wonderful husband and beautiful young daughter, although not necessarily in that order. She has a BA in Anthropology from the University of New Hampshire and an MA in International Studies from Birmingham University in the UK. She daydreams constantly, and gets her best story ideas while running; she is even training for a half-marathon. She also finds inspiration in Nature, a quality revealed through the powerful description and drama in her books. Currently TO BEWITCH A HIGHLANDER, HIGHLAND THUNDER, and TO LOVE A WARRIOR (Books 1-3 of the Isle of Mull series) are available, and Lily is also the author of A JEWEL IN THE VAULTS~one of the seven original novellas included in the Scrolls of Cridhe Bundle by the Guardians of the Cridhe (available now). Other Guardians of Cridhe authors include Victoria Zak, Tarah Scott, Ceci Giltenan, Kathryn Lynn Davis, Sue-Ellen Welfonder, and Kate Robbins.

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